
THE IMMORTAL NINON

A CHARACTER-STUDY OF
NINON DE L'ENCLOS

By

CECIL AUSTIN



Ninon de L'Enclos, that very remarkable woman of the French seventeenth century, is a splendid subject for interpretative biography. The author has treated her from this point of view in a lively and original character-study from an unusual angle. The romance of her life is well brought out, but its underlying significance is not missed. Morality, and sexual morality in particular, is of perennial interest, and Ninon was a moralist to a much greater degree than is usually supposed. She was a pioneer in the field of sex. Her ideas are not yet fully understood, nor has her influence yet reached its climax.

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THE IMMORTAL
NINON



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NINON DE L'ENCLOS

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By
CECIL AUSTIN

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INTRODUCTION

BIOGRAPHY can be written in several ways : as an attempt to reproduce the atmosphere of a period by grouping its events around some central figure ; as a record of striking actions that have had important social or political consequences ; or, finally, as an exposition of character and point of view. A study of Ninon de l'Enclos would have little meaning unless it were predominantly the last ; for though few lives can have been so romantic as hers, it would be a serious error to allow the attractions of romance wholly to obscure its underlying significance.

Morality, and in particular sexual morality, is of perennial interest. To a much greater degree than is commonly supposed, Ninon was a moralist, whose ideas are still imperfectly grasped and whose influence has, perhaps, not yet reached its climax. In the field of sex she was a pioneer who could count on more sympathizers to-day than at any other time ; and all the deeper if they should scorn unthinking discipleship whether in principle or practice.

INTRODUCTION

In other branches of conduct Ninon was less original, but she may be held to have represented a point of view that has been widely forgotten and that will have to be slowly and painfully regained if progress is to rank as more than a welcome fiction. All points of morality are disputed. Ninon was a lover of variety, and the story of her life will have been ill told if it does not give rise to various opinions.

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I

A REBELLIOUS DAUGHTER

It still lacked a few days to Easter. The long fast of Lent, in an age when even the boldest hardly dared to touch meat during the penitential season, the passionate, reiterated, appeals of monks and clergy to turn from the snares of the world and accept the guidance of the one true Church had had their effect upon the pleasure-loving, but devotedly orthodox citizens of Paris ; even though they knew that the great Cardinal under whose iron hand they tremblingly crouched cared more for the things of this world than the next.

The priest of St Jean-en-Grève had certainly no reason to complain of his congregation. The deep, close-packed rows of men and women had listened with wrapt attention to his words of rebuke and warning, while the black-shrouded coffin in front of the high altar had served still more forcibly to remind them that death came some day to all. Foremost among the devout was a well-dressed woman still in early middle life, whose sole companion was a radiantly beautiful girl of some thirteen or fourteen years of

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age, who was obviously finding it hard to control her impatience with the amplitude of the priest's discourse. The end came at last, and for a minute the silence in the church was unbroken, save by the sobs of those who gave vent to their wrought-up feelings in tears. Then, a clear young voice rang out gaily : " Why are they crying ? *Qu'importe que mueran si ressuscitan.*" The Spanish words were spoken with scarcely a hint of French accent, but they sounded, nevertheless, only too little foreign and unintelligible to the bulk of the scandalized worshippers ; for they were the refrain—slightly altered to fit the occasion—of the most popular love-song of the day, and applied to the resurrection of lovers slain by the bright glances of their ladies' eyes. Everyone turned to gaze in horrified astonishment at the youthful authoress of so startling a criticism. This tacit inquisition did not banish the smile from her lips, nor call more than a faint blush to her cheeks, but her companion was less patient, and grasping the culprit, almost savagely, by the arm, she hurried at her best pace from the church amid ill-repressed titters. " It is Mme de Lenclos and her daughter Ninon," whispered one to another. " Madame is truly pious, but Ninon evidently takes after her scamp of a father and is the pet of all the ' libertins ' of the Marais."

Mme de Lenclos was a kind woman and an affectionate mother, but she would have thought herself false to her duty if she had easily pardoned

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her daughter's outrageous behaviour. In France it was then a thousand times more serious a matter to mock at the rites of the Catholic Church than it is to-day. During the long generation since Henri of Navarre had held Paris worth a mass the tide of piety had been steadily rising, and the Parisians, however lax in morals, viewed with unfeigned horror the small band of "libertins" who dissented, more or less openly, from the prevalent faith.

Mme de Lenclos was in complete sympathy with such feelings. Wit, knowledge, and beauty had been denied to her, but she had found in the lessons of the priest a consolation for these defects and a refuge from the many troubles of her married life, now of nearly twenty years' duration. By birth a demoiselle de La Marche, she was connected with the Raconis, and has often been falsely supposed to have borne that aristocratic and distinguished name. Her husband Henri de Lenclos was also noble, but it seems probable that his wife's parents had accepted his suit for their daughter's hand rather as the only alternative to a convent than on any other ground, for his means were small and his principles not such as to please an orthodox family. If, on his part, the dowry was the essential question that would have been quite according to rule.

Henri de Lenclos was a native of Champagne, born towards the end of the sixteenth century, and under the necessity of making his way in a troubled world

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as best he could. Courage, skill in arms, an attractive appearance, and rather more of learning and taste than usually belonged to persons of his rank equipped him not unhandsomely for the task. His passions were strong and various, the chief being for women and music. In the existing state of morals the former was more likely to prove a help than a hindrance, but the latter was, at best, a doubtful advantage ; for to show oneself a competent musician was, as things then stood, to run the risk of being classed with mountebanks. In Henri de Lenclos, however, passion was apt to be stronger than self-interest and he made himself so excellent a musician that he could at any time have passed for a professional player of his favourite instrument, the lute.

Like other young men of birth, he sought from an early age to attach himself to some great noble, entering first the household of the Duc d'Elbeuf and afterwards that of Maréchal de Saint-Luc, a congenial master who sympathized equally with his love of pleasure, his musical tastes, and his libertinism of thought. Henri de Lenclos' habits and views must have been very far from agreeable to his pious wife, but she never secured enough influence to wean him from them in any degree, though he does not appear to have been actively unkind. Their only daughter was born some five years after their marriage, late in the autumn of the year 1620, and was christened by the Curé of St Jean-en-Grève on the 10th of November,

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receiving the name of Anne ; for which, in practice, the affectionate diminutive, Ninon, was quickly substituted.

If the decision had rested solely with Mme de Lenclos there would have been no doubt as to the little girl's future. She should, in her mother's opinion, look forward to becoming a nun, the best and happiest life for any girl, and particularly for one who, like Ninon, had no prospect of a large dowry. Accordingly, she resolved that Ninon should be brought up to love her Church and delight in its ceremonies so that by the proper age she could recognize her vocation and take the vows with enthusiasm, or, at worst, without demur. Unhappily for these dreams, Mme de Lenclos very soon discovered that Ninon, charming and sweet-tempered though she was, had a will of her own and knew perfectly what she liked and disliked, and that among the things she most plainly disliked was the thought of spending her life in a nunnery. Mme de Lenclos, however, did not attach much weight to the feelings of a mere child, and continued to bestow the greatest pains upon her daughter's religious education, in the hope that a change of mood would come with the years.

Meanwhile, M. de Lenclos began to feel an affectionate interest in his pretty daughter, and to give himself some trouble about her training. His views were quite different from those of his wife, and, in Ninon's eyes, greatly preferable. She learnt

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eagerly everything her father wished her to learn ; languages, literature, music, nothing came amiss. Italian and Spanish were quickly mastered, and something more than a beginning was made with Latin. The music lessons were equally successful. Ninon's lute-playing was admirable, she sang sweetly and danced to perfection. She also showed an unusual interest in her father's thoughts. Without being in any way a professional philosopher, M. de Lenclos was a warm admirer of Montaigne and Charron, especially of the former, whose keen insight, wide knowledge of the world, and easy, gossiping style were exactly suited to a man of active mind who had neither time nor inclination for the labours of a scholar. Ninon shared his admiration, and M. de Lenclos was delighted to find that, even though she was still a child, she could understand and appreciate a good deal of Montaigne's subtle wisdom.

These days of happy and fruitful companionship between father and daughter came, however, to a sudden end ; for, when Ninon was hardly twelve years old, M. de Lenclos' hot temper involved him in a duel which terminated fatally for his opponent, and which was so irregular that it might too easily have passed for an assassination. Cardinal Richelieu, then at the height of his power, had been known to punish an infringement of the law against duelling by death even in the case of persons of the highest rank, and in the circumstances, M. de Lenclos had no

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choice but to flee from France with all convenient speed.

If Mme de Lenclos regretted a husband who had not in general been harsh and whose infidelities must have seemed to her very much a matter of course, she could take comfort in the thought that henceforth Ninon would be entirely under her control. She was able to insist upon a more regular attendance at mass and the other services of the Church, and to find frequent occasion for warnings against the vanities and dangers of the world.

For some little time the effect remained doubtful. Ninon was a very affectionate and unusually truthful child, with the smoothest temper and a pretty air of quite genuine seriousness which gave grounds for hope that, as she grew older, she might show decided symptoms of an inclination for the religious life. Her love of books continued in full force, but did not yet embrace manuals of devotion, and though she obediently attended mass, she generally contrived to slip some form of entertaining literature between the covers of her mass-book. Montaigne was still her favourite author, to whom she presently added Rabelais, and a number of lighter works, such as the romances of d'Urfé and the tales of Queen Margaret of Navarre, as well as various foreign writers, Spanish, Italian, and a few Latin ; rather to the uneasiness of Mme de Lenclos, who could read no language save French, and had little taste for

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literature. However, Ninon would not part with her books, and perhaps no great harm was being done, though she was certainly a strange child. She would sit for hours, not idly dreaming, but with her mind concentrated on some puzzling question, and then, if anything happened to arouse her, she would pass on the instant to a mood of the most reckless gaiety, and pour out floods of the lightest talk on every imaginable subject, giving free play to her wit, fancy, and love of life.

But daring as Ninon often was in these moods, she never said anything at which her mother could reasonably take offence, nor did she ever talk for the sake of displaying her talents. In society, she seemed to know intuitively when to keep a guard upon her tongue, and on what occasions to take a prominent part or to retire into the background, being equally free from shyness and from vanity.

All the greater, therefore, was her mother's pain and astonishment at the outrageous boldness of her exclamation in the church of St Jean-en-Grève : "*Qu'importe que mueran si ressuscitan,*" and she told Ninon with all the sternness she could muster that the father confessor must come at once and have a very serious talk with her. He came in haste. Ninon received him very graciously, and without a sign of nervousness. After a minute or two, Mme de Lenclos left the room in order to give the worthy Father a quiet opportunity of bringing home to

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Ninon the full enormity of what she had said. He spoke long and eloquently, but the result was not all that he had hoped. Ninon waited patiently until he had quite finished, and then remarked without the least tone of ill-humour : “ What you priests tell us is sheer nonsense. I don’t believe a single word of it.”

The incidents of this day finally awakened Mme de Lenclos from her dream. Whatever else the future might have in store Ninon would never become a nun. That path to safety was closed, and Mme de Lenclos acknowledged mournfully to herself that no other safe path was open. Her position in the world had never been very secure, and it was made worse by her husband’s exile. It was not that their friends had fallen from them or grown cold. On the contrary, as her qualities of mind and person developed, Ninon became each year a greater social favourite. But they dwelt in the Marais, and that quarter of Paris had a peculiar complexion, most dangerous to a girl of Ninon’s temperament. It was a society highly various and yet free from sharp divisions, composed of great nobles who had built houses in what was then a new and growing district, of dissipated young men of fashion, often themselves belonging to the noblest families, who found in it unrivalled opportunities for pleasure, of literary men in search of broad-minded and generous patrons, of lesser nobles, such as M. de Lenclos himself, who were seeking to push their fortunes in the world, of women of equivocal standing,

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among whom Marion de Lorme, then at the height of her beauty, was the most famous and the most ardently admired.

Mme de Lenclos had always felt herself an alien in the Marais, and she trembled to see Ninon making it so willingly the home of her heart and adopting without scruple all its ways. There was, however, one compensation. Ninon's growing loveliness and charm of manner would be certain to attract suitors, though unfortunately her dowry would be small, and Mme de Lenclos was sufficiently a woman of the world to know that this precluded any hopes of a distinguished match. For a suitor she had, in fact, not long to wait. The handsome young Chevalier de Saint-Étienne made a chance acquaintance with Ninon and speedily succumbed to her fascinations. Growing dissatisfied with casual meetings, he approached Mme de Lenclos, frankly avowed that he had fallen in love with her charming daughter, and asked formal permission to pay his suit. Mme de Lenclos made no difficulties, for Saint-Étienne was of noble birth, his manners were as attractive as his looks, and she was not in a position to know that his dissipations and his freedom of thought were alike notorious among the young dandies of the Marais.

At first all seemed to go well. Accustomed though she was to admiration and to the high-flown gallantry then fashionable, Ninon listened with marked interest while Saint-Étienne exhausted language in vows of

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devotion and praises of her unmatched beauty with an energy and persistence that appeared to betoken some much deeper feeling than the half-conventional passion of a casual admirer. Her interest deepened, and it was soon plain that her heart was touched, but Mme de Lenclos also noticed, to her surprise, that on any hint at marriage arrangements Ninon became indifferent or vague. In other respects she was not always easy to understand. As long as Saint-Étienne was present the flow of gay and witty talk was only interrupted to give place to the slightly veiled expression of tenderer sentiments, but no sooner was he gone than Ninon grew silent, and seemed even more deeply sunk in thought than was usual with her. Mme de Lenclos had long abandoned any attempt to probe her daughter's mind. She knew that they differed profoundly in temperament and in beliefs, and that the only way in which they could contrive to live in tolerable harmony was to trust to their strong mutual affection, to respect each other's secrets, and to leave certain matters undiscussed.

The days went by but, save that Ninon's kindness for Saint-Étienne was obviously on the increase, the situation became no clearer, for though they were practically avowed lovers, marriage seemed as far from their thoughts as ever. Mme de Lenclos was puzzled. She had not the least suspicion of Saint-Étienne, who had perfectly succeeded in convincing her that he was the victim of a deep and lasting passion.

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The hesitation must be Ninon's, although her feelings were hardly open to doubt, and Mme de Lenclos had not hitherto suspected her of any tendency to shrinking coyness. At last there came a definite change. Saint-Étienne began to measure the space between his visits by the civility of a friend rather than by the cravings of a lover, and on each occasion Ninon showed herself colder and more tranquilly indifferent. Mme de Lenclos could bear the suspense no longer, and summoned up her courage to ask for an explanation. Ninon gave it quite frankly. She acknowledged that she had been in love with Saint-Étienne, but that did not mean that she had ever wished to marry him ; for she had gone out into the world and recognized the truth of the descriptions that her father used to give her ; wives were the slaves of their husbands, and even a convent was better than so one-sided a union, where the woman sacrificed everything, submitted tamely to a master, and yet left him entirely free. Ninon did not limit her explanation to generalities. While she doubted whether Saint-Étienne had ever had the least intention of marrying her, she admitted that he had been a completely successful lover, and that she did not regret it, save in so far as she now realized that he was a worthless scoundrel, purely selfish, and devoid even of the physical courage which was the birth-right of a gentleman.

Mme de Lenclos was inexpressibly shocked at this candid avowal. How could Ninon, who was so

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affectionate, so charming, such a delightful companion, do and say things like this and not even have the grace to feel ashamed of them? Henceforth, Mme de Lenclos resolved, she must be guarded much more carefully and forbidden to go about alone, or to see any young men, when not under her mother's eye.

During some months Ninon submitted to these precautions quietly enough ; for she was fond of her mother and hated to give her pain. The difficulty did not lie here, but in the fact that it was impossible wholly to isolate Ninon without something equivalent to a public admission of her fault, while to go anywhere in society could not fail to provide her with a swarm of ardent admirers. One of these (Henri de Lancy Chevalier de Raré) soon made himself conspicuous by the warmth of his attentions. Naturally, Mme de Lenclos did not omit to make careful inquiries about him. They were not very reassuring. The gallant, certainly, had a far better reputation than Saint-Étienne. He was, beyond dispute, a man of courage and honour, but he was the gayest of the gay, a close friend of the Abbé Scarron and of other young men equally notorious for reckless freedom of life and thought. Mme de Lenclos quickly decided that Ninon should see no more of him. She gave her orders, and Ninon obeyed them, though with unconcealed reluctance ; for she had tasted the delights of love, and was more than ready to drink again from the same intoxicating fountain.

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One day she was gazing listlessly out of the window, when, by good fortune, Raré happened to pass along the street, and, of course, turned his eyes in her direction. The exchange of passionate glances fired Ninon's blood. She was alone. In a moment she had slipped down stairs and run out into the street. Raré greeted her with warm expressions of devotion which were soon exchanged for even warmer embraces. At that instant a tactless, or, possibly, keen-witted beggar came up, and began whining for alms. Raré savagely ordered him to be off. He refused to stir ; for he knew well enough that the young man could not engage in a scuffle with a street beggar, and that in the present circumstances he would be unwilling to attract any public attention. Neither Ninon nor her lover had a farthing in their pockets, so, in despair, she pulled out her lace handkerchief, and, offering this to the beggar, told him to go about his business. The man grinned, and seeing that he had got all that he was likely to get, obeyed.

Meanwhile, Mme de Lenclos discovered her daughter's absence and waited anxiously for her return, but several hours passed and still Ninon did not appear. At length, she came in, gay and smiling. In response to her mother's eager, nervous questions, she at once acknowledged that she had seen M. de Raré passing in the street, and proceeded to give a tolerably detailed account of her subsequent adventures.

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Mme de Lenclos was pious, but she was also a Frenchwoman, and, therefore, capable of looking undeniable facts in the face. She saw that she must take Ninon as she was, for good and evil, and allow her to go her own way unhindered ; for only so could they continue to live together ; and, at any rate, her daughter loved her, of that she was, happily, quite sure. Matters turned out much less ill than she had feared. Ninon's passion for Raré proved almost as fleeting as her affair with Saint-Étienne, and before many weeks had elapsed, Mme de Lenclos thankfully observed that she was quite ready to remain at home, and to seek no other pleasures than those which normally belonged to a girl of her age and condition. Fortunately there had been nothing in the nature of an open scandal, and as far as Ninon's position in society was concerned, she might have been the most proper of maidens.

This tranquil state of affairs had endured for some considerable number of months, when Mme de Lenclos' health gradually began to fail. Night and day Ninon watched by her sick bed, distracted with remorse and anxiety. Though she had acted deliberately and from her own point of view wisely, she could not help fearing that her behaviour had been a more poignant grief to her mother than had appeared on the surface, and had contributed to produce this unexpected breakdown. She questioned herself closely. Would she have done better to have waited ?

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That would not have been impossible. The flood-tide of youthful passion had been almost overwhelming in its strength, but she acknowledged that she had not so much been borne away by it as become convinced that to struggle against it meant life-long torture ; and to what purpose, or with what hope of release from futile pain ? Ninon had never been ignorant. Montaigne had taught her to see love as a natural function. Men and women were not to imagine themselves above Nature ; for they were a part of the natural world and could not be otherwise if they would, nor fight with any profit against their destiny. Let them, on the contrary, accept Nature and learn to understand their own characters if they truly wished to make of human life the little that was possible. Rabelais, also, had taught substantially the same lesson by revealing love in the frank animalism of its physical details, truth naked and unashamed, while d'Urfé by attempting to throw over these same acts and emotions a veil of romance had only added the subtle emphasis of concealment.

Ninon's experience had not been limited to books. Meeting almost from childhood with gallants who sighed and languished, pledging themselves to devotion with every extravagance of compliment, and vowing it happiness to die for a touch of her hand or a smile, she had soon learnt that words were light coin, that the passion her adorers professed was largely selfish, when not merely conventional, and that not one of

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them would, in truth, have made a serious sacrifice for her sake.

In Ninon's view knowledge of books and of the world united to discredit the exaggerations of romance, and she had early made up her mind that love was a delicious gift of the senses, and nothing more. Then passion had come to her, and proved sweet enough to banish all philosophy and incline her, for the moment, to the belief that anything so wonderful must last for ever ; but it had gone almost as quickly as it came, and with clear eyes she saw her adored lover in his true character, base and selfish. Love returned in a fresh guise, and passed again. All Ninon's experiences had pointed in one direction, that love should be enjoyed while it lasted and abandoned unregretfully when it had ceased to please, that her father's maxims were founded on a just knowledge of the world, and that other men shared his beliefs though they might not have the candour to avow it. If different rules of conduct were imposed upon girls it had seemed that this was only because men were jealous and the stronger sex.

But now the fear that she was indirectly responsible for her mother's illness renewed Ninon's uncertainties ; it might be that she, too, was selfish, that she would have done better to submit, and to make no attempt to think for herself or to aim at any different goodness from that of other girls. For the present, however, Ninon was dispensed from finding an answer to these

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problems. Her mother's illness grew more and more serious, absorbing all her time and care, and giving no opportunity for love to disturb, or vary, the current of her life. Her devotion proved vain. Towards the end of the year 1642 Mme de Lenclos died, and Ninon, who had not yet reached her twenty-second birthday, was left desolate; for she had heard nothing of her father since his exile and did not even know whether he was alive or dead.

Ninon's nerves had been strained by the long months of watching and alternate hope and fear. She felt all the horror of a first great grief and, for the time, she despaired of life. She wanted nothing but peace and, if possible, a good conscience. Society and its pleasures were odious to her, passion a tale without meaning which could never help nor hurt again. She resolved to do what her mother had always wished, and take refuge in a convent. She had noticed that nuns often looked calm and happy, and perhaps she, too, would learn to be happy some day. Accordingly she fixed on a nunnery at a little distance from Paris, and went to see the Mother Superior. She told her story and was received with perfect kindness and compassion. No very searching questions were asked about her orthodoxy, for she had no public reputation for scepticism, and the nuns knew that she must, at first, be encouraged and allowed quietly to get accustomed to the idea of the religious life.

In a week or two she was as much a favourite in

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the convent as she had been in the Marais. Time and change of scene did their usual work. Ninon's health began to improve, and she recovered a little of her wonted cheerfulness ; but with health and vigour the old perplexities returned. Her life was not hard, and the nuns were all as kind and forbearing as possible, but Ninon wondered whether she could endure this monotony, this constant round of masses, offices, and small duties year after year to the end of her life. It was peaceful, but she was beginning to feel that peace might be bought at too high a price.

II

LOVE IN THE MARAIS

STRANGE and startling news from her old home in the Rue des Trois-Pavillons put an end to Ninon's doubts. M. de Lenclos had returned to Paris. The state of her father's health, Ninon learned, prevented him from coming to fetch her, but he ardently longed to see his little daughter again and hoped that she would join him immediately. In law M. de Lenclos was still liable to arrest and punishment, but in fact he had not now much to fear. Cardinal Richelieu had a long memory, and during his lifetime exile had been the only safety, but his death in the autumn of 1642 had changed everything ; more especially as it was known that Louis XIII must soon follow him. The heir to the throne was a child. It was not yet clear into whose hands the real power would fall, and ambitious men would be glad to extend their patronage to any persons who might be useful, without raking up their past history. It was ten years since the fatal duel, and M. de Lenclos felt that he could live quite safely in Paris, and even had some hopes of being taken into the household of Retz.

Her father's return made it impossible for Ninon to remain any longer in the convent, and duty and

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inclination so fully coincided that, though she acknowledged that the nuns had been very kind, her heart danced with joy at her recovered freedom. Her joyousness was short-lived. When she reached the Rue des Trois-Pavillons she found M. de Lenclos far worse in health than she had expected. He looked an old, worn-out, sick man dependent only on the unquenchable gaiety of his spirit for the belief that he could still take an active part in affairs, and welcoming his daughter's presence with the eagerness of an invalid hungry for companionship and unconsciously in need of support. Ninon could now share all his tastes and interests, he delighted in her beauty, grace, and wit, and speedily forgetting the long years of absence and silence that had separated them, he made her more than ever the object of his sympathetic affection. To Ninon it was rather like going back to the days of her childhood, and she was happy to live again in a time that had itself been very happy.

As the months went by, however, M. de Lenclos grew steadily weaker, and, at length, he was forced to recognize that his career was over. One evening he called Ninon to his bedside. "You can see," he said, "that now nothing is left to me but the regretful memory of pleasures that I shall enjoy no more. I have enjoyed them for but a short time, and that is my only complaint against Nature. You probably have many years to live. Make full use of them. Have no

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scruples as to the number of your pleasures but be fastidious in your choice."

Ninon perfectly well understood that her father's counsel was chiefly intended to apply to her choice of lovers, and she was quite willing to act upon it ; for it matched with her own delicate and variable taste.

For some time after M. de Lenclos' death, Ninon continued to live in the Rue des Trois-Pavillons. She had no lack of friends. Among the most conspicuous as well as the most genuine and faithful of them was the poet, Scarron, whose talents, tastes, and misfortunes alike commended him to her notice. Born of an ancient family of Piedmontese origin, who had settled in France and distinguished themselves in various branches of the law, fate had seemed to promise him an easy and successful career. His father, who held high judicial office in the Parlement of Paris, was wealthy and eccentric, fond of legal subtleties, and gifted with an eloquence equally interminable whether his subject was professional or his favourite hobby, the merits and infallible inspiration of his namesake, the Apostle Paul. The future poet was the child of his first wife, and her only surviving son.

Unfortunately for the boy and his two sisters, their father married again, and his second wife proved a veritable stepmother to them. Greedy and contentious, she was firmly resolved that every penny of M. Scarron's fortune should eventually pass to her

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and her children, of whom she had several. Nor was she less grudging as to expenditure on her step-children during their father's lifetime; and young Scarron, witty, pleasure-loving, a maker of verses, and a frequenter of theatres, when they were more distinguished for humour than propriety, was compelled to take orders because his stepmother grudged the outlay that would be required to buy him an office in the law. After her husband's death, she employed every known device to fight his son's indubitable claim to a share in the estate. The consequent litigation dragged on for years, and when judgment was finally given in Scarron's favour, his stepmother died, apparently killed by the disappointment. Her children renewed the dispute, contested their half-brother's rights with savage determination, and, after further years of delay, were able to force or persuade him to be content with a small sum in settlement of his claims.

In the meantime other misfortunes had overtaken him. The Bishop of Le Mans, who was a friend of the Scarron family, and who cared more for wit and liveliness than for religious zeal, agreed to take the young Abbé into his household, and, in good time, to give him a canonry. Scarron was not unhappy in his new position. His ecclesiastical duties were light, the provincial fashions and manners amused him, and he made some useful friends, the chief being Marie de Hautefort, the virtuous and charming favourite of Louis XIII, who, having given offence to

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the all-powerful Cardinal Richelieu, had been exiled to Le Mans.

Scarron seldom allowed his clerical status to interfere in any way with his amusements, but, nevertheless, it was sometimes a little inconvenient. During the carnival of the year 1638, he was sitting in his room in the Bishop's palace, bitterly regretting that his dignity did not allow him to take an unrestrained share in the season's follies, when some masked men entered. The sight of acquaintances in a holiday mood made the temptation to join their frolics irresistible, and Scarron immediately thought of a freak that would surpass all others in wild absurdity. He hastily tore off his clothes, procured a large pot of honey, and carefully smeared himself all over ; then, ripping open his mattress, he rolled his sticky body round and round in the feathers until he was completely covered with them from head to foot; and, thus equipped, he sallied out, masked like his companions, into the main street of Le Mans.

At first people were agreeably startled by the appearance of this monstrous bird, but Scarron could not restrain his laughter, and, gaining courage, the mob ventured to touch the feathers, and then began to pluck them off by handfuls, until not one was left. The mask went the way of the feathers, and Scarron stood revealed with his round face, huge, staring blue eyes, and plump figure. Shrieks of mirth greeted this exhibition, but they had a savage undertone.

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How dared the Bishop's chaplain play such a shameless trick? These young abbés fancied they might do whatever they pleased. Sticks were raised and stones began to fly. Scarron did not await the outcome. An angry French crowd has never been a thing to laugh at, and he ran for his life. He was young and still fleet of foot; he gained considerably on his pursuers, reached the banks of the river, and dashed through the overhanging branches to plunge up to his neck into the chill water. There he had to stay until his enemies were tired of looking for him, and he could creep back, blue and shivering with cold, by the most unfrequented paths to his home.

He had paid dearly for his jest, but he was to pay much more dearly in the future. He was seized with rheumatic pains, which daily became more severe and crippling, until, in a few weeks, he could hardly move without crutches, and suspecting that there would be no improvement as long as he remained in the hands of the doctors of Le Mans, he decided to go to Paris and consult the best physicians before it was too late. His hopefulness was ill rewarded, for they could do little or nothing to alleviate his pains; and, in despair, he turned to various strange and disgusting quack remedies, which, naturally, all failed. He was now a Canon of Le Mans, but the income from his canonry was small, he had no other resources, and it seemed likely that he was fated to be an almost helpless cripple for the rest of his life.

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He still had a few compensations; a brave and careless spirit, a ready pen, a good digestion, and an insatiable appetite for the pleasures of the table, which were in fact almost the only pleasures left to him. As yet he had hardly tasted fame. He was known as a writer of burlesque verses, a witty talker, and a friend to good living in the fullest sense of the term, but his very real literary, and even poetic, merits were not displayed until a later time, and though some of his poems had circulated in manuscript, and were well known to people of taste, he had still to publish his first book.

His sister Françoise was living in Paris as the acknowledged mistress of the Comte de Tresmes, by whom she had had three children, and with her the young Canon decided to make his home. Intellectually she was a congenial companion, but she did not scruple to take advantage of her brother's careless good-nature for her own financial profit, a circumstance that probably gave him little concern or surprise; for he was lavish with his money when he had it, and himself by no means backward in soliciting favours. By the help of his friend Marie de Hautefort, he now enjoyed the title of the Queen's Invalid and a small pension. With this, his canonry, and a precarious but increasing income from his writings, he managed to live in tolerable comfort and, despite his ill-health, to see a good deal of the lively society of the Marais.

Ninon, who was ten years his junior, he had known

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from childhood, and he had been among the first to express his sorrowful amazement at her fancy for becoming a nun and to welcome her return to Paris with uproarious delight. It was no passing enthusiasm. The mockery and malice which Scarron had so much at command on all other subjects were never turned against Ninon or her ways, and to the end of his life they remained the closest friends ; for the brave and witty cripple appealed both to Ninon's love of good company and to her invariable sympathy with pain and misfortune.

Ninon, however, was not Scarron's only friend. In his days of youth and health he had tried, like many others, to win the favour of the beautiful Marion de Lorme, the uncrowned queen of the Marais. He found her still at the height of her fame on his return from Le Mans, and she was not unjust enough to despise his friendship because he was now almost paralysed. Although of noble birth, Marion de Lorme chose from her early youth to lead a life of pleasure rather than be consigned to a convent or submit to the little less galling restraints of marriage. Her first lover, the free-thinking and free-living author, Des Barreaux, was followed in quick succession by many others. Her father was dead, her mother abandoned all attempts at control, and more accommodating than Mme de Lenclos, kept house for her daughter without blushing at her mode of life.

Fully Ninon's equal in beauty, Marion was more

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passionate, and also more venal, giving her favours with great lavishness, but not averse from selling them when opportunity offered ; for she lived for expense hardly less than for enjoyment. A passion for Louis XIII's favourite, Cinq-Mars, had promised to end in marriage and respectability, but Cinq-Mars crossed the path of Cardinal Richelieu, his head fell on the scaffold, and Marion continued to lead a life which was more honourable than that of the ordinary demi-mondaine and something less so than that of a woman of the best society.

Scarron was the last person to be fastidious in such matters, and though his physical infirmities now made love out of the question, he was glad to frequent Marion's house and to introduce Ninon ; if, indeed, she required any introduction. In any case Ninon, who was very seldom jealous and who could win the hearts of her own sex almost as easily as those of the other, found Marion's circle of friends much to her taste ; all the more because they were no mere clique of affected free-livers, but men of the world who counted in their ranks some of the highest born and most brilliant members of Parisian society. So little was Marion ostracized in any quarter, that though her noble friends might speak lightly, not to say coarsely, of her among themselves, yet even the proud Prince de Condé did not scruple to invite her to his wedding. However great her freedom of life, Marion de Lorme was never a " libertine " in the then current sense of

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the word. In spite of the Cinq-Mars affair, Cardinal Richelieu had been her lover, and ecclesiastics more renowned for orthodoxy than the great Cardinal could have found in her something to praise ; for to the end of her life she remained a devout Catholic, attentive to her religious duties and anxious rather to confirm than to unsettle the faith of her friends, not a few of whom were thought to be “ libertins ” at heart.

Bussy-Rabutin, Mme de Sevigné's brilliant, selfish, and self-satisfied cousin, still young and handsome, and not yet embittered by the sense that royal disfavour had shut him out from the honours due to his genius, could be found at Marion de Lorme's, as at all other places which offered abundance of good talk and pretty women. An older and more intimate friend was the sarcastic Marquis de Rouville. He was commonly credited with having been the immediate successor of Des Barreaux in the good graces of his hostess, and was certainly at one time enough in love to fight for her sake a duel with the Marquis de Ferté Sennerre ; but he had since transferred his affections to Mme de Montbazon, a Rohan by birth, who possessed all the bad qualities of a prostitute except the name. To Marion's, also, came the brave Du Vigan and the Marquis de Pisani, only son of Mme de Rambouillet, both fated to an early and tragic death, Henri de Chabot, who won the hand of Marguerite de Rohan, Roquelaure, Chavagnac, and many other of the gayest

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and most fashionable young men in Paris. A rarer guest was the poet Voiture, the idol of the Hotel de Rambouillet, whose refinement, tact, and unflinching independence earned him the respect and admiration of the highest nobility of France despite his humble birth and narrowly limited income.

To such a society Ninon was equally attracted and attractive ; for she possessed almost every quality that was then valued in women : a wit that was more than readiness of mind united to feminine perception, being the product of a highly trained intellect which achieved without effort or display that speedy justice of thought and expression which the French have always held the supreme test of social merit, a skill in playing upon the lute that seemed nature in the child of a passionate musician, and a delicate grace in dancing the fashionable sarabandes that enchanted all beholders. To these qualities were added physical charms that would alone have won ardent homage ; for her youthful promise of beauty had been amply fulfilled, and when she appeared men could turn their eyes from the ripe perfection of Marion de Lorme and wonder which divinity was the fairer. Women forgot to be jealous, and a feminine contemporary could describe Ninon as having an impeccable figure, the most beautiful chestnut hair ever seen, black eyes, gay yet full of fire, a brilliant complexion, soft contours, the rosiest of red lips, and a little cleft in her chin that became her to dis-

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traction. The unchecked development of a splendid humanity was visible in every feature, giving life to each look and grace to each movement.

Ninon, lovely with the hopeful loveliness of her twenty-three years, need fear no rivals. At this time she had not, like Marion de Lorme, a reputation for freedom of life. As far as the world knew she was marked out from other maidens only by the abundance and variety of her charms ; but it was even then clear that she was no prude, and her many suitors were for the most part as little intent upon marriage as she was, hoping for the prize of special intimacy, but willing to be friends if that failed, and, at first, receiving no more than friendship.

One evening, however, Ninon found that a guest, new to her though familiar to others of the company, figured among the accustomed throng. This was Gaspard de Coligny, Marquis d'Andelot. Though hardly more than a boy, the Marquis was one of the best known and most admired gallants in Paris. His father, the Maréchal Duc de Châtillon, was a grandson of the famous Admiral Coligny, and was, what he could hardly help being with such ancestry, a Protestant.

Gaspard's elder brother, Maurice de Coligny, had notoriously become a slave to the charms of the adorable Duchesse de Longueville, and, through the malice of Mme de Montbazon, was falsely thought her successful lover, a slander which was to involve

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him in a duel with Henri de Guise, and to lead to his early death and the succession of Gaspard to the Dukedom of Châtillon. Both brothers were intimate friends of the Duc d'Enghien, afterwards Prince de Condé, and had shared in the glories of his late victory at Rocroi, when the hitherto invincible Spanish foot-soldiers had succumbed to the impetuous chivalry of France. Both were brave, but Gaspard, being physically the stronger and the better skilled in arms, gave more promise of achieving military fame, a promise that was on the road to fulfilment when death prematurely closed his career at the battle of Charenton.

His soft, almost feminine type of good looks and delicate manner concealed his real character from strangers, while giving him a singular charm, to which his friends, particularly those of the other sex, were far from being insensible, all the less because he would have proved himself no true son of his father if he had failed to respond warmly to the interest that they felt in him. At the present moment the queen of his heart was Marion de Lorme, who was the fairer game because she displayed an unwonted reluctance and would yield nothing beyond smiles to a Coligny, urging that he was a heretic and should, if he were truly the slave he professed to be, renounce his creed for her own. The young Marquis hesitated to make such a sacrifice to his passion, not because he cared greatly about religious questions, but because for a Coligny to change his faith was to condone the

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St^r Bartholomew, and this touched his family pride. Meanwhile he continued to visit Marion assiduously in the hope that she would eventually consent to bestow her favours at a cheaper rate.

Ninon's entrance did not at once distract Coligny from the ardent court that he was paying to their hostess ; for she was a stranger to him and he marked her beauty with a careless eye. Presently, however, Ninon was asked to play upon her lute, a thing that she very seldom consented to do in public. Coligny had enough musical taste to recognize that her execution was masterly, and before long he joined the group of eager gallants who, as usual, surrounded her. A rather slow-witted man, he had never imagined that conversation could unite so much of gaiety, lightness, apt reflection, and the most delicate variety as he then heard ; nor, perhaps, would he have been equally impressed upon another occasion ; for all her friends perceived that Ninon was surpassing her highest standard. There was a light in her eyes that none of the company had ever seen, a light that some of them were destined to know well, that Saint-Evremond could still call to mind after thirty years of separation, and that he still believed might shine in Ninon's eyes when she was far on the lonely side of sixty years. Marion's beauty grew common-place, almost vulgar, by comparison with such charm, and in a few days Ninon and Coligny were avowed lovers before all the world.

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To Coligny, Ninon gave her heart in a way that she had never given it to Saint-Étienne or to Raré. She now looked back on the emotions that they had excited as girlish, almost childish fancies, unworthy to be compared with this full tide of love. She had not the faintest care for her reputation or for the gossip of her neighbours, friends, and rivals. She adored Coligny, she firmly believed that he felt a like passion for her, and, so far as she thought about the matter at all, she was proud that their love should be known.

But very soon Coligny's mood began to change. He had, at heart, very little in common with Ninon. She had been a fascinating novelty, a glorious amusement, a conquest equally satisfying to his passions and to his masculine vanity, but she had given him all that he cared to have and he grew speedily tired of the demands that her love made upon him. He did not long attempt to conceal his feelings, and became first languid, then indifferent, then openly neglectful. Marion de Lorme now offered the greater attractions, for she had still to be won, and if she wished him first to become a Catholic, he would do so ; for he had many reasons, of which neither she nor Ninon knew anything, to incline him to the acceptance of the dominant faith, and he could allow Marion to suppose that his conversion was solely due to the irresistible influence of her beauty, and then claim the promised reward ; which, in fact, she was not slow to grant.

Ninon's dreams of a deep, enduring love faded

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even more quickly than they had arisen ; but she would not at once abandon hope ; for though pride suggested that she should leave her faithless lover to go his own way, passion proved stronger, and she wrote him a letter frankly avowing her undiminished adoration, and entreating him to return to her arms. She was spared the supreme mortification of a direct rebuff. Coligny did not break with Marion, but pity if not love spoke for Ninon, and led him once more to her side. She welcomed his return with ardour, hoping desperately that the intensity of her own need for him would give fresh life to his dead or dying love, and bring back the ecstasy of their first union. She was quickly undeceived ; for Coligny, weary of excitement and cloyed with devotion, responded to her caresses with a civil languor. In truth, Ninon meant nothing to him, and Marion very little. Another beauty, Isabelle-Angélique de Montmorency-Bouteville, had caught his eye. She belonged to one of the greatest families of France, fully equal in all respects to his own. To pursue her would be a different kind of sport, and would have a different ending.

Ninon was forced to acknowledge defeat. She had won her lover easily but she lacked the strength to hold him. He went from her, regardless of entreaties, and she was left alone. It was a new and bitter experience. Love had come, had seemed to change everything, to give unimaginable, all-absorbing glamour to life, and now it had gone, leaving nothing

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behind, nothing, not even friendship or welcome memories ; for though it had brought the keenest bliss, the recollection of that bliss was poisoned by the consciousness of impotent longing and failure.

Presently Ninon heard that Coligny was about to be married to Mlle de Montmorency-Bouteville, and that it was to please her powerful and orthodox family that he had become a Catholic. Neither Ninon nor the prospective bridegroom could foresee that the future Duchesse de Châtillon would repay with interest her husband's infidelities to her sex, that he, for his part, would tire of her as he had tired of every other love, and that he would gallantly meet death in the battle of Charenton with the garter of Mlle de Guerchy tied round his arm, leaving Condé in tears for the loss of a friend, while his widow would hardly even trouble to affect distress.

III

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HER experience with Coligny confirmed Ninon's belief in her father's teaching ; passion gave an unequalled savour to life, but it was not to be trusted or taken for a divine ecstasy, being no more than a kind of blissful madness which came one knew not how, and went, one knew not why ; a lover might be unworthy, but one adored him while the madness lasted ; he might, on the other hand, be everything that was admirable, and yet leave one perfectly sane. It was useless to grieve and unjust to condemn ; for neither party could help their feelings nor prevent them from changing, and neither was, in truth, under any obligation to the other.

Ninon's sense of abandonment did not, therefore, last long. Since Coligny had forgotten her she would learn to forget him, and she found the lesson surprisingly easy, all the more so because she had abundance of willing teachers. Coligny's desertion had the effect of making other gallants more eager and more hopeful in pursuit, for the shadow of matrimony was no longer present to cool their ardour ; not that promises of marriage by desperate wooers were lacking ; but Ninon reckoned these waste paper.

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One admirer soon made himself conspicuous. M. Coulon was a rich financier, a friend of the notorious d'Emery, and a humble imitator of the methods by which the intendant Fouquet afterwards accumulated wealth sufficient to excite the fatal jealousy of Louis XIV. Robust, good-humoured, more careful that men should talk of him than of what they said, M. Coulon paid vigorous and flamboyant court to Ninon as soon as her reputation for both beauty and kindness was established. Opportunity was his friend. For the moment Ninon was weary of languid and heartless refinement ; and though M. Coulon, with his openly expressed indifference to the notorious faithlessness of his wife, was certainly absurd, and, perhaps a little gross, Ninon found that she could listen without disgust to his frank proposals, a plain meal being sometimes more appetizing than delicacies.

At any rate she consented to put the matter to the test. M. Coulon was overjoyed. It was not enough to have succeeded, everyone must know of his triumph, and learn to see in him the acknowledged lover of one of the two most famous of Parisian beauties. He valued this reputation so highly that he did not scruple to claim it after it had ceased to have any foundation in fact, and to give it colour by lavish expense ; for wealth was his standard of merit, and a conquest lost half its value if it could not be made an occasion for display. It was quite in Ninon's manner carelessly

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to accept his gifts without feeling any concern because she thereby helped him to persuade men of the world that she was dependent on his bounty and allowed the coarser-minded to think that she chose lovers for their wealth. No one, however, who understood Ninon, not even the spiteful annalist, Tallemant de Réaux, believed this. Her favours were not to be bought by M. Coulon or anyone else, and though she would take presents, she always made it clear that they must be true presents, simple tokens of friendship, carrying with them no sort of obligation express or implied. To give was not to smooth the road to her heart but to make it difficult, perhaps impassable.

At a later date, a certain M. Perrachon, a native of Lyons, in which town Ninon happened for the moment to be living, made her a gift of a house worth twenty-four thousand livres—a very considerable sum in those days; at least equivalent to the same number of twentieth century dollars. Like many commonplace persons, M. Perrachon imagined that a woman who was leading an openly irregular life must have the soul of a prostitute, even though she made some pretence of delicacy. He had claimed to give as a friend or Ninon would have refused his gift, but in his heart he believed that he had bought the right to pass from friendship to love. When, however, he presumed to act on this supposition Ninon quietly explained how matters stood, and returned his gift forthwith.

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Their acquaintance ceased, but this may have been due as much to accident as to design. Ninon was critical, but wholly uncensorious. She had her own strict standards of taste and conduct which, in a certain sense, she required her intimates to recognize. Those who broke the rules of her drawing-room were excluded from it remorselessly, but, save perhaps in the case of drunkenness, she blamed no one, finding in human vagaries matter for laughter in plenty, for reproach scarce at all. M. Perrachon had made a ridiculous mistake. Had he been otherwise amusing, Ninon would doubtless have been glad to retain his friendship, though not his property.

M. Coulon had many successors. One of the most eager was the Comte de Miossens, afterwards Maréchal d'Albret, a namesake and connexion, if not a descendant of Sir Perdiccas d'Albret, the freebooting companion of the Black Prince. A true Gascon, M. de Miossens was prompt to seize an opportunity, dowered with boundless self-assurance, and quite averse to hiding his merits from the world, in spite of a curious unreadiness of speech that often involved him in the most laughable confusions, without, however, in the least diminishing his natural volubility. He ultimately recovered large family estates which had been wrongfully alienated about a century before ; but at the time of his first acquaintance with Ninon, his means were much on a level with those of d'Artagnan, and other heroes of his province, real and

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fictitious. He did his best to escape the discredit of poverty. One day a friend asked him why he had engaged a soldier to keep watch over possessions which consisted of no more than three stools. "Oh," he replied, "there is, truly, nothing for him to guard, but people will think that I would not employ him unless there were a good deal, and that has the same effect."

In love M. de Miossens was formidable, feared by husbands for his enterprise, and by their wives on account of his constant preference of a new love to an old. One of his most intimate and useful friends was the Duchesse de Rohan of whom Tallemant des Réaux remarks that : in a country where adultery was respected she would have been a very honourable woman. Bashfulness M. de Miossens thought mere folly, and women often yielded to his confidence what they refused a more timid lover, especially as in the field of love he showed no trace of the Gascon habit of letting words take the place of deeds.

Unalterably frank herself, Ninon appreciated M. de Miossens' straightforward love-making. The insipid, hesitating, and long-winded gallantries that were coming into fashion among the frequenters of the Hotel de Rambouillet were never to her taste. Her clear, ardent, incisive mind welcomed the shortest road to delight, and scorned, without bitterness, the pruderies, vanities, and fictions of her sex. M. de Miossens, therefore, found conquest easy, but he could

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learn no more than others the secret of holding the territory that he had gained. Ninon was accustomed to surrender without useless parley, but in her eyes the victor acquired no prestige, much less any permanent rights. He, for his part, knew very well that the time would soon come when he must yield possession to some eager knight armed with the magic of novelty ; meanwhile, there was no treachery to dread, he could enjoy the fruits of his victory undisturbed, and could count on receiving clear and tactful notice when his reign was over.

M. de Miossens had little quarrel with such terms and, more fortunate than many, he achieved, after an interval of a dozen years, a second conquest, as delightful if no less brief than the first. By that date the honours and wealth that he sought had come to him abundantly, and were to flow still more freely in the sequel. At his death he had long been a Marshal of France, he held the Governorship of Guyenne as lieutenant for the king, and he enjoyed a private income of forty thousand livres. All these honours neither alienated him from Ninon nor moved her to jealousy. She wrote him a letter of congratulation on his appointment to Guyenne, explaining with a characteristic dislike for conventional and possibly intrusive words, that she would not have troubled him, save that the bad reports of his health had made her think of the fine Greek saying that the envious gods exact for their seeming gifts an ample price, and she

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could not forbear to tell him of her joy at hearing of his recovery.

If Ninon preferred a vigorous wooer it was not because of lack of initiative on her own part. One day she was being carried in her sedan chair—she could not afford and probably did not desire any more pretentious equipage—down the Cours de la Reine, an avenue extending along the banks of the Seine that had been laid out by Marie de Medici and had since become a favourite resort of fashion. Among other persons of note Ninon observed the Maréchal de Gramont, who presently stopped the chariot in which he was driving in order to speak to a very handsome, fair young man on horseback, obviously with the purpose of asking him to share his drive ; for the latter dismounted, handed his horse to a groom, and entered the Maréchal's chariot.

As a rule Ninon was incurious, but she felt so sudden and warm a concern in this young man that she resolved to find out immediately who he was, his appearance being quite unfamiliar to her. Many bystanders, however, were better informed, and told her that he was the young Duc de Navailles. So far so good. She now knew how to address him, and her lackey would easily do the rest. Accordingly Ninon pulled out her tablets, wrote a short note, and gave it to the man with express orders that it was to be delivered to the Duc de Navailles in person, then, having settled this important matter, she proceeded

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to the Paris end of the Cours and waited anxiously. After what seemed to her an interminable delay the Duc de Navailles appeared, once more alone and on horseback. Ninon was saved the embarrassment of words ; for Navailles greeted her courteously and expressed himself as more than delighted to accept her invitation to supper that evening.

On reaching the Rue des Trois-Pavillons, he perceived that he was to have the honour of being the only guest. He had no reason to complain ; for his hostess was in her most gay and charming mood and the supper left nothing to be desired, the wine being abundant and admirable—though Ninon herself drank water only—and the dishes most delicate. Navailles did full justice to the good cheer, and afterwards betrayed such obvious symptoms of an inclination for repose that Ninon forthwith conducted him to a small but delightfully neat and pretty bedroom. Only for a short time, she explained, would he be left in solitude. Navailles accordingly got into bed and waited. Presently he began to think that Ninon's ideas of time were not very precise. He was tired, he had supped well, and his bed was excessively comfortable. He did not wish to be uncivil, but he caught himself dozing, woke with a start, dozed again, and ended by falling fast asleep.

A few minutes later his door opened. No man could have looked upon a more delicious picture than that doorway framed. Ninon's rich chestnut curls fell

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massively about her shoulders, her black eyes shone with even more than their wonted lustre, her fair, rounded arms gleamed softly in the candlelight, a faint flush stained the transparency of her cheek, and the hint of a smile played about her full, red lips. It was fated that no one should see that picture ; for not a sound or a movement broke the stillness of the night. This was not the reception that Ninon had expected. She stepped gently up to the bed, and drawing aside the curtain, gazed upon the handsome features of her guest, which looked none the less handsome in the untroubled repose of a profound and healthy sleep. Surprise, a shadow of disappointment which passed instantly, giving place to a smile, were followed by the quick turn of the head that with Ninon betokened settled mischief. Swiftly and quietly she gathered together Navailles' clothes, not forgetting his long rapier and heavy, plumed hat. With these spoils she returned to her own room, and following her guest's example, got into bed and immediately fell asleep.

At dawn she awoke and dressed herself carefully in Navailles' garments. Then she walked, as noiselessly as huge, broad-footed leather boots would allow, to the door by which she had retired, after so unexpectedly brief an interval, the night before. She set it ajar, and peeped in. All was well. Navailles was still obviously sound asleep. She threw the door wide open, and strode into the room, her scabbard

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clattering at her heels. She drew the rapier with a swish, and at the same time uttered a loud and deep-toned oath. Her guest awoke, staring, remembered vaguely where he was and jumped to the natural conclusion : " Monsieur," he cried, " I will give you satisfaction. I am a man of honour. In the name of Heaven do not take an unfair advantage of me."

His prayers were greeted with a peal of laughter. Ninon threw down the rapier, and discarding the hat which concealed her features, ran to the side of Navailles' bed. He was relieved from one anxiety, but another, hardly less urgent, took its place, the need of justifying, as far as possible, a discourtesy which Ninon must have felt as an insult. He exhausted himself in apologies and protestations. It was a wretched accident, unpardonable he knew, but would she prove herself the angel she looked and forgive him. Ninon had no reason to be hard-hearted, and a companionable morning made amends to both for a lonely night.

A favourite who better appreciated his privileges was the Marquis de Jarzé. He was a lover such as any girl might dream of. Handsome and gay, he was distinguished among brave men by his reckless courage. During the Fronde he and a few companions bearded the Duc de Beaufort in the garden of the Tuilleries at a time when Beaufort was the idol of the Parisians and was surrounded by friends. Strangely enough Jarzé escaped unhurt from

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this mad enterprise. His daring temperament appealed to Ninon who granted him a longer period of intimacy than was her custom, and his name has become connected with one of the many legends of her life : for he has been imagined the father of that son who on reaching manhood met his mother as a stranger, fell passionately in love with her, and committed suicide on hearing the truth from her lips.

No one, however, could hope permanently to enjoy the honour of Ninon's friendship who lacked intellectual or artistic gifts. In a lover she desired physical charm and masculine vigour, but if they could boast only these attractions their reign would be a brief one, and they would never know more of Ninon than the senses revealed ; her intimate thoughts, the key to her personality, would escape them.

Among those who aspired, not unsuccessfully, to a place in Ninon's mind was Antoine de Gombaud, chevalier de Méré. He did not long affect an exclusive devotion ; for Ninon was not, in truth, quite of the pattern most congenial to him. His self-esteem had no limits. He ranked Pascal as one of his pupils, and it was to pupils that he seriously inclined ; if he had his choice they should be of the opposite sex, young, pretty, and intelligent. Ninon was too strong, too much her own master for his liking, and it was only in his later years that he learned to recognize the rare quality of her mind and character. Ninon was less unperceptive. She appreciated M. de Méré's talents

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through the veil of his conceit, and made him her intimate. Ninon loved argument on life, love, and literature, and M. de Méré was learned in all three. A scholar, well read in the wisdom of the ancients and a special admirer of the genial philosophy of Epicurus, he was also a man of action and affairs, who served with distinction through many hard fought campaigns. Nor did his love of the classics blind him to the beauties and possibilities of his native tongue. French scholarship was in vogue, and M. de Méré aspired to a high place among those who were engaged in making the French language the almost perfect instrument of expression that it became in the next age.

If Ninon cared little for military affairs, she was woman enough to value courage at a high rate, and sufficiently on an intellectual level with her masculine contemporaries to appreciate all M. de Méré's other gifts. Her knowledge of Montaigne taught her to sympathize with his taste for the doctrines of Epicurus, and her sense of language to appreciate his French learning, not, perhaps, so uncritically as to prevent her from detecting in him a tendency towards the affectations and pedantries of the degenerate Hotel Rambouillet. There were few matters that M. de Méré was not both willing and able to discuss with subtlety and enjoyment, few convictions, save that of his own genius, which he was not ready to question, few topics that seemed to him more worthy of debate than love. Here, too, practice and theory could be admirably

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combined, and, while holding himself the better master of the principles, he could admit that in the varied delights of practice Ninon was unsurpassed and inexhaustible.

If he was sometimes a pupil, he was at least an apt one, coming through a stringent test of masculine jealousy without discredit, by accepting unreluctantly a letter of Ninon's addressed to a friend who, as M. de Méré well knew, was on or over the verge of a more intimate relation. True, he unsealed and read the missive before delivery, but he delivered it none the less, and he could claim that his motives had been good. It had not proved of a kind to disappoint the recipient, and at this he was so far from being surprised or dismayed that it was, on the contrary, what he had expected and wished. No doubt, he had committed a breach of etiquette, but he really deserved credit for it, since his aim had been to establish Ninon's character. A lady of his acquaintance was in the habit of professing the greatest incredulity as to the real existence of the virtues which her men friends so universally attributed to Ninon. She was, the lady had maintained, no less artful than other women, and for example one might take her loudly expressed regard for M. de Méré's friend—if, however, one could see her next letter to him one would be sure to find in it evidences, conscious or otherwise, of contempt. M. de Méré had maintained the opposite opinion, pledging himself to Ninon's perfect good

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faith, and asserting that the letter in question would be found to contain nothing but the warmest and most sincere tokens of affection. It was, he explained, simply for the sake of determining this controversy and not at all from jealousy, that he had opened the letter, and therefore he was delighted to find that it proved him correct and wholly justified his previous belief in Ninon's virtue. It is melancholy to have to add that despite this conclusive refutation the lady's view of Ninon's character was unchanged. If she had not as yet many friends among her own sex, among men, at any rate, Ninon had both friends and lovers in the utmost abundance, though she did not necessarily unite the two characters in the same person. Some of her lovers were unworthy to be counted as friends, and occasionally even the most intimate friends would fail, though never willingly, to reach the position of a successful lover. The poet Charleval was generally believed to have experienced this hard fate ; for it was reported that on his attempt to advance from friendship to love Ninon coolly bade him to await her caprice. The expression was characteristic and became proverbial ; for Ninon regarded all love as a " caprice " and was in the habit of gaily acknowledging that she was now at her twentieth " caprice ", or whatever the number might chance to be. In such matters proof is impossible, the question of Mme de Lionne to an enthusiastic upholder of the spotless virtue of Mme de Maintenon : " How do you manage, Monsieur, to

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make so certain of these sorts of things," being always apposite.

M. de Charleval had, doubtless, to wait his turn, but whether Ninon proved permanently unkind only he or she could have told, and they may well have kept their own secrets. Ninon was the reverse of shy, but it is not to be supposed that she felt bound to confess to every single affair of the heart in which she happened to become involved, and if M. de Charleval was prone to boast of such things in his youth she may have taught him wisdom in that, as, perhaps, in other ways.

At any rate it is beyond dispute that Charleval possessed qualities which made a strong appeal to some sides of her nature. His ornate but tasteful dress, his refined good looks, and easy manners were a just reflexion of his mind and character. Pleasure, not business, was the main concern of his life, and his chief pleasures were literature and feminine society ; in fact he might truthfully have applied to himself the verses of his friend, Saint-Pavin :—

*Je hais toute sorte d'affaires,
Je ne me fais point de chimères,
Et n'ai l'esprit embarrassé
De l'avenir ni du passé.*

Ninon's personality was more complex, but she could sympathize with such a point of view, and the refined carelessness of Charleval, a carelessness that sprang, not from indifference but from a desire to

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savour the passing moment undisturbed, drew her more and more closely to him as the years went by. When their long intimacy was at last closed by his death, she lamented that to lose such a friend was worse than to die, and was only made in any degree tolerable by the thought that if the separation were eternal the consciousness of it would not extend over more than a few years.

Such melancholy reflexions were for a later time ; the youthful Ninon was too entranced with life and love to grant them much space in her mind. She was spending her personality with freedom in all directions, but not recklessly. It might be that she was growing while she seemed to waste. The event alone could convict her of folly, or prove her wisdom.

IV

M. DE SAINT-EVREMOND

AMONG the crowd of gallants whom she met at Marion de Lorme's Ninon soon learnt to distinguish a tall young man, slightly but strongly built, and with striking, irregular features. The small, keen, deep-set eyes, the long nose, the firm mouth, and spare, prominent chin of the man of character and perception were surmounted by the brow of a thinker. His speech and manner did nothing to belie the impression made by his appearance. One was obviously in the presence of a man of the world, who had cultivated his mind and not forgotten to observe the behaviour, and, in particular, the little weaknesses, of his fellows.

Ninon, however, was being swept along by the full tide of her passion for Coligny, and had, at first, little attention to give to a man who did not even seek to rival Coligny in her good graces ; who seemed, rather, to watch their proceedings with a cool, sarcastic eye, and, though but a few years their senior, already to look upon love as providing more matter for mirth than for enthusiasm. But this armour of cynical good sense was by no means impenetrable. A glance or a word from Marion was enough to make a breach, and any more decided marks of favour quickly turned

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the placid observer into an eager suitor, who, forgetting his harsh features, and the, as yet hardly noticeable, wen at the base of his nose, tried to prove that by the help of wit and elegance he could surpass his physically more fortunate competitors. Apparently he was not self-deceived. Marion de Lorme was frequently kind—everyone could see that—exactly how kind her admirer, with more discretion than was usual, kept to himself, or revealed only to a few chosen intimates. Presently Ninon discovered that the young man was the famous M. de Saint-Evremond, the author, as all the world guessed, of the anonymous satire on the French Academy and its members which had lately filled Parisian society with gusts of laughter. Always attracted by talent, especially a talent for literature, Ninon cultivated an acquaintance that speedily ripened into an enduring friendship.

M. de Saint-Evremond was worthy of this distinction. Born of an ancient Norman family, he could not, as the third son, look forward to enjoying more than a moderate part of a fortune which, though large, was not superior to his father's rank and duties, and which must, in addition, be made to provide careers for his six brothers and sisters. From childhood he was known for his subtlety of mind and ready speech. His father thought that these qualities pointed towards the law, and was careful to give him a good education, sending him, first, to the Jesuit College of Clermont, and afterwards, for the sake of

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his legal studies to the university, while, at the same time, providing that he should learn fencing, riding, and the other bodily exercises required of a gentleman. Saint-Evremond took advantage of his opportunities so far as to acquire an excellent general education and to become distinguished for his skill of fence, but he speedily threw aside the law for the more exciting career of a soldier. The Duc d'Enghien, his junior by a few years, already commanded the French army, and was about to show that he deserved the position from natural military genius as well as by right of birth. Saint-Evremond accompanied the Duke to Flanders, won his friendship, and learnt on the day of Rocroi that he was serving under one of the world's great captains. At the end of the campaign he returned to Paris to signalize himself as a man of wit and literature.

As soon as his passion for Marion de Lorme had a little cooled an irresistible sympathy drew him towards Ninon. She responded fully. Like others he wooed and won, but his real gain was far greater than theirs. They might only be favourites, he was the friend whom Ninon trusted and admired all her life.

The bond between them was essentially mental not physical, whatever its physical incidents. To Ninon community of mind was very nearly as attractive as community of body, and in a cool moment she valued it at a higher rate. She had a passion for lucidity, an unflinching determination to see to the end of every-

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thing with which she was concerned, and she found that no one could help her in the task of understanding her own nature and the world in which she lived so well as Saint-Evremond. She must understand or be ruined, her position claimed that relentlessly. A young girl, an orphan, without near kinsfolk or powerful friends, she had fixed her heart upon living her own life and satisfying the demands of her strongly sensuous temperament, openly and without shame. But she was no mere creature of sense. If she had been so, her life would have been easy and unimportant. She was an artist, and, in her fashion, a moralist. She must have beauty varied and abundant, beauty through the direct enjoyment of works of art, beauty and self-expression in her surroundings, beauty, above all, in the form and pattern of her life. Her true genius, as she felt obscurely if she did not yet know it, was for the art of living. If she had the potentiality of genius in other directions, in literature, and possibly in music, yet these were to her less than life. She would write, for her own amusement and for the occasion, she would play in the same manner ; but friends and lovers in their own capacity were to her what the public is to an artist who seeks response to his work. Isolation meant death.

But Ninon had the sincerity of an artist, and her medium was life. To be false to her private standard, to taint her soul with hypocrisy and pretence would have been sordid, ugly, and therefore, unendurable.

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Yet it might well seem that her only choice lay between compromise and isolation ; for on two essential points she deliberately rejected the custom of her world. The current creed seemed to her riddled with superstition and folly. She saw interested hypocrites exploiting the credulity of the multitude, unbalanced fanatics proclaiming the vital importance of some tiny, distorted fragment of truth, or of customary error, while the majority professed a confident faith, which was brushed aside like gossamer if it interfered with passion or self-advancement. The Church, however, ruled, and meant to continue ruling. Opposition and criticism were in principle condemned, tolerated grudgingly and perforce from a few men, and strenuously denied to the other sex. Ninon was determined to think for herself, and to proclaim her thoughts, not loudly, but firmly ; in consequence the Church with all that great part of society which stood by the Church must be her enemy.

This, however, was not her most difficult problem, nor the one that lay nearest to her heart. She was a woman before she was a Catholic. Beneath all the show of gallantry, it was plain that her sex were inferiors. If they secured any degree of liberty or power it was by means of feminine wiles and feminine falsehood, the freedom and influence of the artful slave. Ninon raged inwardly at this state of affairs. At times it seemed to her that the sole point of honour for her sex, the one feminine virtue held in repute,

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was chastity and that even this was for the most part conventional, a mere show of honour without the reality. What, she wondered, did men really want of women? Did they not, in their hearts, desire that their own womenkind should be inviolate and all other women open to successful attack; and was not the chastity which they praised an awkward, incoherent compromise between the two? This virtue, she observed, was for her sex alone; it had not the slightest place in the code of an honourable man, and his virtues, the true virtues, sincerity, loyalty, friendship, humanity, and courage, were not expected of a woman. Ninon chose these for her share, and felt that by choosing them she could preserve unblemished her self-respect, but she also felt that she must keep the respect of the world, or, ultimately, lose almost all in life that she valued. How was it to be done? How did other women do it? The great majority of those she knew accepted marriage, and used it as a convenient cloak to cover their frailties. It commonly served its purpose, however thin it might wear; but not always, a high-born husband could, if he chose, condemn an erring wife, or one merely suspected of error, to lifelong imprisonment. In law a husband was master, however seldom he in fact exercised his full powers. Apart from the question of risk, secret lovers meant for the woman constant falsehood and deception, and these were the very things that Ninon had vowed to keep out of her own life.

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Should she then follow the example of Marion de Lorme, who at any rate had never bound herself by marriage ? Marion was lovely, and she trusted to her beauty and charm to win her respect. It was an open course, but it was a dangerous one. Ninon had sharp eyes, and she could see plainly enough that most of the young gallants who fluttered around Marion and paid her extravagant compliments scorned her in their hearts. The instant she had nothing more to give they would show it ; for they were men of the world, and had no quarrel with its standards, which did them, personally, no hurt. Ninon saw that if she were simply to live like Marion she would be walking along a razor-edged path ; she could not do it unless she had some glimpse of higher and safer ground beyond. She must be clear as to what she wanted, where she was going, and what it was possible to do.

Many of Ninon's friends would have said : gather pleasure with both hands, and let the future take care of itself. Defy the world, it is mostly made up of fools who will always be your enemies ; show that you do not care for them or their opinion of you. She felt in her own nature a response to this counsel, but she felt also that this was not being clear, it was forgetting, putting aside thought because it was too difficult or too unpleasant. There was no form or direction, nothing artistic in that sort of life. How was she to make terms with society, and yet not become its slave ?

All this was passing through Ninon's mind during

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the first weeks of her friendship with Saint-Evremond. He helped her more than anyone else had done, and she remembered his help with a gratitude that never faded. He gave, in the first place, his sympathy. No gift could have been more valuable. He was not her lover, and, therefore, she could trust him. He had nothing to gain by pretending to a sympathy that he did not feel ; and his goodwill meant so much. He was not, like her friend the Abbé Bois-Robert, a clever, reckless debauchee without a reputation of his own to lose and, therefore, indifferent to the reputation of his friends, nor was he a kind-hearted buffoon of genius like Scarron. His position was more assured than Miossen's, he carried more weight than Charleval ; he was a man of family, a man with brilliant prospects, and, in addition, he was a Norman who prided himself on possessing a full measure of the sense and caution for which Normans were famous. Nevertheless Ninon found to her joy that he deliberately approved of her ideas and mode of life. He did not merely treat her with respect, he honoured her, and made it his boast that he alone knew how to value her at her true worth. He would counsel, but never with the faintest hint of patronage ; always from the point of view that she was wise enough to understand and fine enough to appreciate. He was glad to spend hours in the discussion of her favourite topics, talking on love and life and friendship and honour, not with an abstract pedantry of a scholar but in the easy tone of a man of

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the world. He had a definite outlook, a working philosophy ; he shared it with Ninon, and by so doing protected her both against recklessness and against the opposite danger of taking herself too seriously. He encouraged her to reject a coarse materialism, to hold fast to good taste and proportion, to take things lightly.

Ninon's situation was so difficult that she was occasionally tempted to identify her need with that of the world, and to persuade herself that she was the apostle of a cause. She felt bitterly the subjection of women, and, in particular, the double, and almost opposite moral standard conventionally assigned to the two sexes ; and she could hardly help suspecting that this grievance was part of a cause that would one day become important. In this she was right, but that day was not yet, and Saint-Evremond would have none of such fancies. Life was not an affair of big causes, but of small pleasures, mixed inevitably with some pains and disappointments. The sensible man enjoyed the good and bore the evil, without expecting to escape the common lot, or to leave the world very different from what he found it. It was, for example, no use quarrelling violently with religion. Of course there was a great deal that was absurd in Catholicism, but it was not really a different religion from Protestantism, or any other ; it was only religion with a different style, the natural and national style of Frenchmen, and therefore deserving of their respect.

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St Evremond did not believe in prolonged thought about anything. People had been trying for thousands of years to find the answers to great problems, and had never succeeded. We could not hope to know very much, and, after all, it was more important to enjoy the world than to understand it. He acknowledged that mathematics were certain, and he admired the labours of mathematicians ; but he hoped that no one would ask him to imitate them. As for priests, they would always dispute bitterly, not because they cared for their own abstruse doctrines, but because they would not endure rivals in power.

Ninon listened and agreed, but a little against her will. Less self-centred, less purely practical than Saint-Evremond, she had more love of thought for its own sake. On this he used to banter her sometimes, fearing that she would become too learned, too absorbed in thinking about life to be able to live well, and saying that, "if anything could kill her she was doomed to die of a surfeit of reflexion."

The danger was small. In spite of her many hours of meditation Ninon did not lose her power of forgetting the past and ignoring the future for the sake of the delightful present. She would pass in a flash from thought to the whole-hearted enjoyment of the fleeting instant. She did not need strong excitements. Any little thing was enough, and she could throw herself into the most harmless trifle with all the unrestrained enthusiasm of a child. She loved talk and laughter.

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She could discuss any subject from philosophy to the most insignificant gossip and illuminate each with sparkling sallies. A joke was her delight, not merely thin-lipped wit, though none could be more witty than she, but natural, uproarious humour, while if it descended to a boyish game of teasing and being teased, so much the better.

Dancing she adored, even when she was near her seventieth birthday. In her younger days she danced until she was so tired that she flung herself down on the ball-room floor and fell fast asleep with her head resting against the knees of her friend Mme de la Suze, a charming picture that the latter commemorated with the verses :—

*Jouissez, jouissez de cette paix profonde
Que vous offre un heureux sommeil,
Et laissez-lui fermer les plus beaux yeux du monde,
Puisque demain à leur réveil
Ils doivent effacer tous les traits du soleil.*

The only thing that Ninon could not endure was monotony. Saint-Evremond observed this foible, and one day he asked her laughingly how she came to be always so fond of love, since that was very much of a repetition. “That only shows,” answered Ninon scornfully, “that you understand nothing at all about it. Love looks as if it were always the same thing, over and over again, but, in reality, it is perfectly new and different each time, which is just what makes it so delightful.”

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Like many people with an unlimited capacity for pleasure Ninon feared death as little as she feared life. Once, not very long after the beginning of her acquaintance with Saint-Evremond, she was seriously, to all appearance mortally ill. Miossens, Méré, Charleval, and the rest of her friends and lovers gathered round in sorrowful expectation of a final parting. Ninon was not altogether so far gone as they thought. She could still talk, and gave them her last words. "If I am to die," she remarked, "it is a comfort to think that I am leaving behind me none but dying men"—that is "mourants", the accepted phrase for unsatisfied, or, at any rate, still ardent lovers. To the general amazement she recovered perfectly, and took her place in society again with her beauty quite unsullied.

On the whole Ninon found that Saint-Evremond ranked the various pleasures and ills of life in much the same order as she did. She had nothing to unlearn, she was strengthened in a point of view to which she had always been inclined, but he made it more precise, and showed her where it differed from the views of some of her other friends. Ninon loved nature and detested affectation. To live naturally was her ideal. This might mean to live grossly, without refinement or discrimination, the reckless life of one who was at odds with social customs and who had nothing to aim at but the pleasure of the moment, let it be what it would.

Of a cooler temper and in a less difficult situation,

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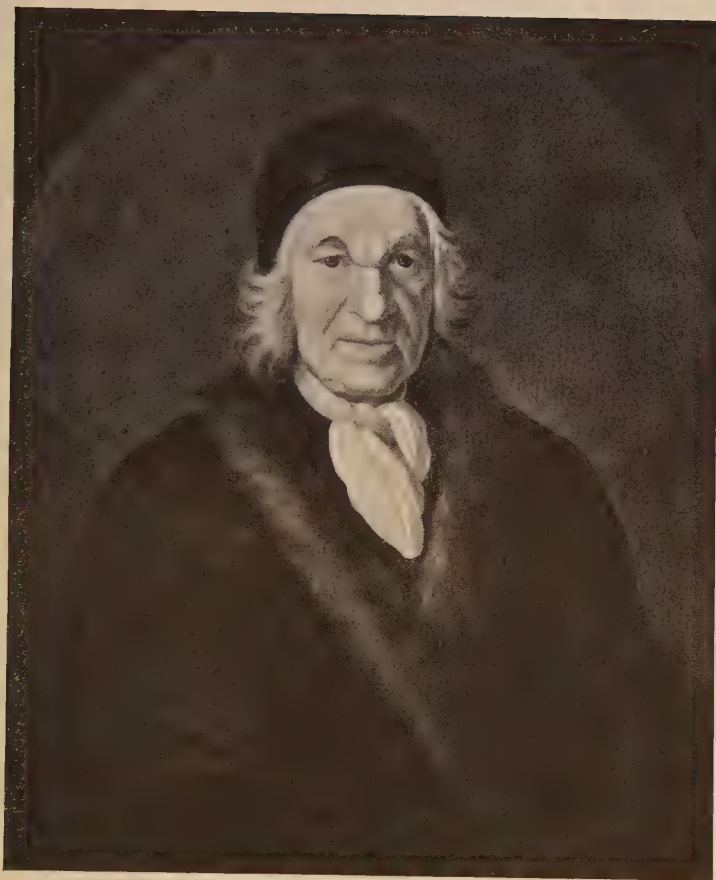
Saint-Evremond easily proved to her the need for care and choice, echoing in this respect the last words of M. de Lenclos. Friendship, honour, delicacy of taste, truth, courage, and intellect were all compatible with a life of unprejudiced freedom. For the first he had only to appeal to her favourite Montaigne whose one deep passion had been for his friend La Boetie. Ninon objected that friendship was so often formal, exacting, egotistic, tiresome, hypocritical. One could not always feel enthusiastic and it was disgusting to pretend. Saint-Evremond agreed, but maintained that the true friendship of a man of honour need not be any of these things ; it took account of the imperfections of our nature and redressed them to the utmost of its ability, it hated affectation and chose the good for its own sake, without vanity ; it was always ready to give pleasure and never thought it had given enough ; it neither praised itself nor sought the praise of the world.

Ninon was moved. This was what she had always felt in her heart. It was her ideal as well as his own that Saint-Evremond expressed and made clearer and more convincing to her than it had ever been before. She found also that his appreciation of the most delicate intellectual pleasures stimulated her own mind, and deprived a careless animalism of any attraction that it seemed to have, all the more as he was far from indifferent to bodily pleasures and justly prided himself on his fine taste in food and vintages.

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In other matters Saint-Evremond unintentionally confirmed beliefs that were not exactly his own. He was not without ambition, but the cool fashion in which he pursued his aims, and his sarcastic comments on the way in which some men hung on the favour of the court and were ready for any intrigue or baseness that would advance them there, made Ninon firmer than ever in maintaining that there was nothing in the world so truly worthless as baubles 'like the shield of Achilles, the baton of a Marshal of France, or the crozier of a Bishop'.

Her indifference to rank and wealth save as contributing to friendship, independence, and refinement, protected Ninon from one obvious temptation. Before many years the king would be growing up. Ambition would have whispered, a king is a man. Win his heart and your future is safe. If Ninon had listened, her path would, in one sense, have been plain before her. Difficulties, no doubt, she would have had to face, but she could have swept them aside. A meeting of some sort could have been easily contrived at the proper moment. Louis XIV was intensely susceptible to feminine beauty, and hardly less so to feminine wit. To a woman endowed with Ninon's almost magical charm victory was certain had she chosen to strive for it ; years after Louis XIV had attained manhood, the young nobles of France were still at her feet. Her past, let it have been what it might, would have been forgiven and forgotten in the rapture of her



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society. A dazzling success, but success at a price. Truth, honour, friendship must be sacrificed if this race was to be won. The friend, even the wife, of an absolute king is, as Mme de Maintenon found, his slave, who must make everything subservient to his whims, however selfish. Ninon might have taken this course, but she would have ceased to be Ninon, and become merely one more among the many mistresses of the kings of France. To Saint-Evremond she partly owed it that she never took one step along the fatal path.

If Saint-Evremond had merely strengthened in Ninon the better side of her own philosophy, he would have done much. In fact he did a great deal more. He destroyed her sense of moral isolation. He showed that her philosophy was not only hers, but in substance his also, that it was a code by which honourable men were living, and which they could, therefore, respect. This was what Ninon chiefly needed. It gave her hope. Her ideas and mode of life were not bound to mean social ruin, an inevitable declension, when the prime of her beauty was past to the tawdry and second-rate. She need not stoop to society, and yet society might learn to respect her ; for Saint-Evremond did so, and what he could see others might come to see in time. She could walk along her chosen path. True, it was narrow, exceedingly narrow, but she did not care for that, her feet were light and sure, she could go steadily forward now that she knew that the end was not a morass.

V

NINON THE DANGEROUS

To Saint-Evremond Ninon was indebted for a pleasure of a different and even less unfamiliar kind than that of abundant moral discussion. He had become a favourite officer and intimate friend of the young Duc d'Enghien, better known as the Prince de Condé and commonly distinguished by his contemporaries as the Great Condé. The Prince, who united the keenest delight in satire with a capacity for warm and devoted friendship, was drawn to Saint-Evremond by his caustic tongue, perhaps, all the more because it cloaked a real kindness of heart and a genuine admiration for his leader's rare gifts, an admiration which forbade him to show the least resentment when Condé, some years later, unreasonably punished a jest at his own expense with permanent disgrace.

Associating freely with Condé, both in his campaigns and in his recreations, Saint-Evremond would have proved himself either lacking in taste or unpleasantly doubtful of other people's power of appreciation if he had failed to mention Ninon, her charms and her kindness. Condé was duly impressed and at the first convenient opportunity hastened to make her acquaintance.

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Ninon received him warmly. He was a Prince of the Blood, for which she cared little ; he was a hero and a military genius, for which she cared much ; and he was a man of wit and a Catholic altogether devoid of bigotry, qualities that she could also appreciate.

The results of coming into close contact with Ninon were almost as infallible as the law of gravitation. If you were a woman you discovered a life-long friend, and turned the blindest of blind eyes upon those little foibles in which she unfortunately varied from the majority of her sex ; if you were a man it was precisely to those foibles that you gave your closest and most hopeful attention.

Condé proved no exception to this rule. He came, he saw, and was conquered. An invitation to supper was the natural and joyful consequence. The meal was delicious, the hostess still more so, and the other guests were sufficiently tactful and experienced to melt unobtrusively away after a proper interval. Time passed, but Ninon's cheerfulness did not soon flag ; for she had noticed with pleasure that her new friend was a very hairy man. At last, however, she began to be puzzled, and to indulge in longer and longer periods of silence ; for, true to her habits of reflection, she was turning over the evening's experience in her mind. Presently she recollected a Latin proverb that seemed to her to throw some light upon the subject. " *Vir pilosus aut libidinosus aut fortis* " (a hairy man is either amorous or strong), she murmured inaudibly,

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and then looking up, she said, with just the faintest hint of humorous impatience in her voice, "M. le Prince, you must be exceedingly strong." Condé, who lacked neither quickness nor learning, caught the allusion, and magnanimously forgave a criticism more easy to resent than to refute. He soon ceased to be Ninon's lover, but though the proudest man in France—for Louis XIV was still a child—he remained always her friend and took pleasure in showing his respect before the world.

Year by year the number of Ninon's intimates grew larger and her little supper parties more famous. There was hardly a man of fashion in Paris who did not aspire to the glory of being reckoned among her caprices, and though Ninon was quick to choose and quick to change the successful continued to be far fewer than those who hoped in vain. Where competition was so keen, quarrels sometimes threatened, but they died away. It was impossible to quarrel with a hostess whose own temper and tact were never at fault, who treated you with perfect frankness, who asked nothing from you save cheerful companionship and good manners, and who smiled at vows and tears, protestations of broken hearts and eternal constancies.

To quarrel about her seemed easy, but was, in truth, hardly less difficult. Ninon would not tolerate such explosions of wounded vanity from her friends, and if they wished to fight one another they must find a plausible pretext, or run the very considerable

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risk of being made the involuntary hero of some good saying that would keep its place in all the "alcoves" of Paris for the next year or more. They had to swallow their not unnatural annoyance at her changeable fancies as best they could ; and, after all, a quarrel meant something besides the mere risk of a wound, fatal or other, a risk that no young Frenchman of the day would have dared to acknowledge, even to himself, that he took into account. It meant also the end of friendship with Ninon, and even when you were not her lover Ninon was the most excellent company, for there was no spot in Paris where so pleasant an evening could be spent as at her house. Ninon's admirers sighed and fretted but they obeyed, and in an age of duels she was untroubled by the fear that anyone might lose life or limb on her account. Marking, like the sundial, only the hours that were serene, she had no love of storms, and in her presence clouds rarely gathered.

This happy temperament commended her to the poet-philosopher, Des Yveteaux who, having been in his time a centre of strife, wished to spend his last years in tranquillity, far from the king who had benefited little by his tuition and from the intriguing and bigoted courtiers who had played upon the natural prejudices of the widowed Marie de Medici to drive him from his post by exaggerated accusations of impiety and immorality. The old man lived almost beyond the limits of Paris, and seldom cared to exchange

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the quiet of his own little house for livelier scenes, since he had no lack of recreation or company. Music and the arts were his delight, and he loved to fancy himself an Arcadian shepherd enjoying the cheerful peace of the Golden Age.

Ninon often visited him in his retreat, played to him, listened attentively to his talk, for he could still say things that were worth hearing, sympathetically observed his humours, and tried to banish the occasional melancholy of days which grew inexorably less, and whose end was so near. He was pleased to wear her favours like a young gallant, and prized to his last moment a yellow ribbon that she had given him.

Long as he had left the court Des Yveteaux was still a famous man, and the mere fact that he had been made a target for clerical abuse and driven into retirement sufficed to convince most people that he was in truth a leader of the "libertins" and a dangerous enemy to the Church.

Ninon's affection for him, as also her friendship with his younger contemporary Des Barreaux, the early lover of Marion de Lorme, helped to draw upon her the attention of the orthodox and lead them to suspect that she was something more, and in their eyes worse than a second Marion. She began to be recognized as a person of influence. Pious court ladies looked coldly upon her activities, beauties whose charms were suffering from neglect commented acidly

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upon the lengthening list of her "caprices", priests whispered of heterodox discussions and dangerous tendencies. Why had she left the Marais and moved to the Faubourg St Germain if it were not to keep better in touch with some persons of high, perhaps the highest rank? The Prince de Condé was a great man, a hero, but he allowed himself to talk strangely. When the two brothers were in prison together at Vincennes had not the Prince de Conti asked for the *Imitation of Jesus Christ* to comfort himself in his affliction, whereupon Condé turned the request to a joke by asking for "the Imitation of M. de Beaufort", whose escape from Vincennes was famous? The Duc d'Orléans, too, was known to be easily influenced, and certainly had some undesirable friends. M. de Blot, for example, was beyond question a man of wit and talent, but when one had said that one had said everything that was possible in his favour. His freedom of life was notorious, his violent hatred of His Eminence no less so, and his opinions on matters of faith were more than suspect. People were to be judged by their friends, and M. de Blot was one of Ninon's chosen intimates, no doubt, also one of the endless number of her "caprices". Did she not urge him, almost force him to impiety? Was not all Paris repeating the verses he had composed in her honour.

*Malgré ma maudite lulette
Qui rend ma muse un peu muette,*

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Puisque l'adorable Ninon

Trouve bon qu'on chante en carême,

Je ne lui dirai jamais non

Plût à Dieu qu'elle en fit de même.

To sing in Lent songs of the kind that M. de Blot favoured if it was a tribute to Ninon's charms was also a sufficient evidence of her character and the extent of her religious zeal.

In that spring of 1651, such whisperings might easily have results very unpleasant to the person who was the subject of them. Anne of Austria was not puritanical, but she was a Spaniard, accustomed from birth to the mediaeval atmosphere of a land where "miscreant" in the literal meaning of the word, was still a term of deadly abuse ; she was also a Hapsburg, quick to scent anything like a want of proper deference to constituted authority. The influence of Mazarin, supreme with her, and always formidable, was likely to be cast into the same scale. An Italian, playing the game of high politics with more than the skill and zest of a Visconti, and quite devoid of religious enthusiasms, the Cardinal had, nevertheless, the anxious respect for appearances that belongs to a man of the world and, especially, to one whose own past was both open and subject to venomous attacks. Scarron had just launched the most virulent, pointed, and popular of these, anonymously, or lifelong imprisonment would have been the least that he

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would have had to expect. But his style was known and guesses were made. The friend of Scarron could hardly escape suspicion of being a Frondeuse and an enemy to the Cardinal, though Ninon was truly quite indifferent to all politics.

Before Lent closed a curious accident threatened to bring matters to a head. Ninon and a party of friends, which included the Duc de Candale, M. de Mortemar, and others, were having a merry supper. It was not the first of the season, nor the only one at which the Lenten prohibitions had been cheerfully disregarded. The guests, appreciating Ninon's unusual hospitality, became a trifle uproarious, and one of them, by chance or in contempt of secrecy, flung a chicken-bone out of the window. He could scarcely have chosen a more unlucky time for his exploit. A priest of Saint-Sulpice had long been anxious to see and hear as much as he possibly could of what happened in Ninon's house ; it was, in a sense, a duty he owed to her as a parishioner.

On this particular evening he was, in pursuance of this design, walking slowly down the street with ears attentive to such scraps of song or dialogue as fortune might grant him, the height of the window above the ground preventing him, to his regret, from making use of his eyes. He could, however, pause to listen. He did so. A confused murmur of voices reached him through the open window. Then some hard object hit him on the head. The blow was trifling,

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but, nevertheless, he stooped to examine the missile, which now lay at his feet. What was this? He breathed hard with excitement. A chicken-bone, and still warm from the oven! An indisputable proof of crime! Nothing could have fallen more happily. The insult, no doubt deliberate, to a servant of Holy Church would clinch the accusation, if anything more than the bare fact of the chicken-bone were needed. The delinquents must be brought to justice without delay. He would first inform the Curé of Saint-Sulpice, whose duty it would become to report the offence to the Bailiff of the Abbey of St Germain in order that proper legal punishment might be inflicted. The Curé was more horrified than amazed at his friend's story. "Nothing," he agreed, "could possibly be worse. They must go and see the Bailiff who would of course put the law—" "And, by the way," broke in the young priest, "I have proof that two men were murdered at Ninon's at this very evening's supper."

The Bailiff was easily accessible, listened carefully, and was duly shocked at the outrage done to M. le Curé's colleague and to the penitential season, but when they spoke of the murders he smiled a little, and not without reason, for it soon appeared that they had no being save in the excited imagination of the young priest. For the rest, he took down in writing the depositions of both clerics, and locked up the chicken-bone, admitting that it was a most vital piece of evidence; naturally, he would set the law

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in motion against the criminals at once. The two clerics then departed, charmed with the success of their mission and rejoicing in the hope that the career of the scandalous and impious Ninon was, to all intents and purposes, at an end.

The Bailiff, however, had his own methods and ideas. His first step was to inform Ninon of what had occurred. She would not have been herself if she could have helped smiling at so ludicrous an affair, though she knew perfectly well that it had also a very serious side. Fortunately her friends were still at hand to give advice, and after a short consultation, it was decided that the Duc de Candale and M. de Mortemar should go and interview the Bailiff immediately. They thought they knew their man, and went armed with gold. The interview was brief, and satisfactory to both parties. The Bailiff pledged himself to destroy all records, inclusive of the offending chicken-bone, and to see that nothing was done that could inconvenience M. le Duc's friend. One thing, however, neither he nor any other man could do, and that was to prevent the story from spreading. Pious courtiers of both sexes heard it with disgust and hope. Royal authority might easily make good the failure of the law. They appealed to the Queen, but she was unexpectedly luke-warm, and seemed anxious that the whole affair should be forgotten. A high personage, it was hinted, had graced Ninon's supper-party, and he would be much offended by

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tactless investigations. M. de Blot could, no doubt, have named the personage meant, but he kept his own counsel.

Ninon's enemies were disheartened. A good opportunity had been missed, still, it was only an opportunity; Ninon's usual behaviour might be less scandalous than eating forbidden food in Lent, and yet serve their purpose. She was not a woman of the people but a "demoiselle", and the Queen would surely wish to take exemplary notice of conduct so little suited to a maiden of family, one who was supposed in some sort to be a model to her social inferiors. Anne of Austria listened patiently to the tale of Ninon's enormities, a tale that lost nothing in the telling. She was not quickly shocked where feminine foibles were concerned, and she knew as well as anyone that tender hearts could be found in the most orthodox circles. She agreed, however, that something ought to be done. Ninon should be ordered to retire to a convent.

Shortly afterwards Ninon was surprised by a visit from a royal messenger. "I have her Majesty's commands," he explained "to request you to enter a convent with the least possible delay. Her Majesty graciously permits you to make your own choice of a residence". "The Queen is very good," replied Ninon, "in that case I choose the Convent of the Grands Cordeliers. I think, perhaps, I shall be welcome there." The messenger gazed at her blankly.

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“The Grands Cordeliers” was, nominally, a convent, but of men, and its morals were notorious throughout France. “I can only report your answer to Her Majesty,” he said, at length, and left the room. On his return to the Louvre the messenger asked for an immediate audience, and informed the Queen of the unexpected consequence of her orders. “Oh ! the wretch !” said Anne, laughingly, “let her live where she pleases.”

Anxiety for the morals of the parish of Saint-Sulpice was presently allayed by a strange rumour that appeared in the Gazette. Ninon, it claimed, was intending to join the party of colonists who were shortly to proceed to America. The rumour was not wholly baseless. With unquenchable hopefulness Scarron, after more than a dozen years of paralysis, still dreamt that somewhere and somehow a cure might be found, and as there seemed no help for him in France, his thoughts turned towards America, of whose climate and productions men, knowing little, reported marvels. Ninon was one of the first persons that he took into his confidence. She was amazed and excited. It was a wild fancy for a helpless cripple to think of leaving home and friends and crossing the ocean that then seemed almost measureless, to seek health in the fabled lands of the New World ; and yet, who could tell for certain that his courage would not be rewarded by success ? One thing, however, was plain, he must have some companion beyond

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servants or casual acquaintances ; and Ninon, self-confident, pitiful, hating to desert a friend, and loath to prove Scarron's daring greater than her own, lightly offered to share his exile.

Scarron was enchanted, astonished, more than a little incredulous. But Ninon, though she spoke on the impulse of the moment, was, in reality, being true to herself. In her eyes there was no reason why she should not leave France as easily as Scarron if America were truly so wonderful a place ; for it all turned on that. Ninon always sought happiness with a perfectly open mind, refusing to be bound by habit or tempted to believe that what she chanced to be accustomed to had any peculiar value. The world was wide, and she had never had any difficulty in seeing that one person's experience could not possibly exhaust its attractions. She loved novelty as much as she hated vagueness ; anything might be good so long as it was not the mere product of a heated imagination trying to believe that the world must be what we wish, or, if not good, at any rate, worth inspecting. No taint of provincialism led her to suppose that what she had chosen gained anything by becoming hers or from the fact of her choice. Things were simply what they were, whether in France or in America, whether in her own possession or in the custody of a stranger. In Ninon's view the power of appreciation, the key to happiness, lay in thus judging without prejudice. One must not be dulled by habit,

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by past judgments, or even by one's own anticipation of the future. The joy of life was in the event. Pleasure could not be put aside for use another day like a sack of gold. It was to be found in the immediate response of clear insight to a present situation, and only there. Her life in Paris was gay and cheerful, but she guessed most of its possibilities, and she occasionally longed for something fresher and more wildly adventurous ; for a strong sense of the limits of human nature and human affairs did not quite destroy the hope that new experience would bring even more vivid delights than any she had yet known.

It was not very long since her acquaintances had been surprised by a revelation of this side of Ninon's character. It began by her falling in love with M. de Villars, a living representative of the chivalric ideal of manly distinction and graces, who had been identified with the hero of a current romantic novel, and who was in addition a man of real ability. The path of love was smooth until the outbreak of the Fronde took M. de Villars to Lyons. Ninon was left alone and far from content. In spite of the dangers of the road in time of civil war she determined to follow her lover, although Lyons was only a stage on his journey, which might take him over a great part of the South of France. To make the better haste Ninon dressed herself as a man and rode to Lyons on horseback. But her speed was vain, for M. de Villars had already gone. Checked but undaunted, Ninon sought further, and,

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at length, rejoined M. de Villars, only to find that her passion was dying, almost dead, and that his seemed hardly more robust.

Ninon never wasted time on regrets. They parted, and she made her way back to Lyons. There the sight of a convent revived old memories. She had liked her nuns in Paris, and for the moment a retreat to a nunnery looked more attractive than an attempt to gather up such fragments of her old life as the disturbances of the Fronde would allow her to collect. She quickly arranged for her admission and, a little to her own surprise, was happy enough in these new scenes and circumstances. Fate did not give her time to feel the absence of love-making. The Archbishop of Lyons, a proud, dull man, who owed his rank solely to the fact that he was brother to Cardinal Richelieu, soon got wind of the attractive "penitent" who had come to his cathedral city. A fatherly visit suggested itself at once to his mind. He found that the tale of the "penitent's" marvellous charms fell, if anything, short of the truth, and promptly abandoned all show of fatherly interest for more direct methods.

He gained nothing by the change. Ninon laughed at his senile vows, scorned his offers, and mocked the self-complacency which allowed him to fancy that the stupidest Richelieu was a great man whose will should be law to humbler persons. When he persisted in his suit, blandly ignoring the most obvious rebuffs,

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she put an end to a ridiculous situation by leaving the convent for a house in Lyons. Here she could be happy in her own fashion. Provincial life was a novelty, and brought to mind the tales that the Abbé Scarron used to tell about the quaint ways of the people of Le Mans. She quickly made friends ; for she found to her amusement that her reputation had preceded her, and that the provincials were delighted to be shown that it was not penitence nor a wish to retire from the world that had induced her to visit their city.

As Ninon, though highly critical of manners, was quite free from social pride, she was content to look for congenial company among the Lyonese, and might have stayed for some months had not the crude commercialism of young M. Perrachon's attempt to pass from friendship to love decided her to return to Paris. Her taste for novelty was slaked, or rather, her mood had changed and she now felt that she could take up her old life with fresh enjoyment, all the more so because there were good prospects of agreement between the court and the citizens, so that the cloud of civil war had temporarily lifted, and might disperse.

Paris, she discovered, was still Paris. If the political sky was soon overcast by storms from the most various quarters, men, nevertheless, found ample time to make love, and Ninon in the prime of youth and beauty had her full share of their leisure. She handled her lovers with the confidence of an expert. When

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almost at the height of his favour with her, the Marquis de Châtres received an order to join his regiment, which was stationed far from Paris. He was in despair, and Ninon hardly less so ; but for him the prospect of separation was embittered by the thought that Ninon was very unlikely to remain long disconsolate. His pride was touched, and he begged hard for a vow of eternal faith. Ninon laughed at the idea. The Marquis grew angry, and speaking in the tone of a man who has established a claim upon a woman, he again asked for a promise, and in writing. Ninon looked at him curiously, then, snatching up a pen, she signed her name without a word or a smile. The Marquis bore the paper away in triumph. He did not quite understand Ninon. What a friend or a lover had a right to she would always give without any formal guarantee, written or verbal. Châtres had asked for something to which he had no shadow of claim, and had added the insult of demanding a written bond. She valued a real promise, no one more so, but she meant to give this young man a little lesson. Ninon had an orderly mind. For some hours no one had the slightest suspicion that anything unusual had occurred ; for if, now that Châtres was gone, there were symptoms of kindness in another direction, what could be more normal ? Night came. Ninon awaited her moment, and then gasped out, as if the thought had just entered her mind : “ Oh, the fine bond of M. de Châtres ! ” Her companion

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eagerly inquired what she had meant by this mysterious exclamation. Ninon told him, and Châtres proudly showing his bond to a brother officer, was greeted with a roar of laughter and the tale, hot from Paris, of Ninon's latest.

Ninon knew how to make distinctions. M. de Rambouillet was able, with a tact worthy of his name, to mingle with vows of his own eternal constancy a plea to be assured that his bliss was not to suffer instant death at the hands of his volatile charmer. He made no claim, there was no question of a journey or of any ties to be preserved at a distance, he spoke as one who was Ninon's willing slave, proud and happy to receive the least of her good graces, but too much her lover not to wish that their love might be eternal, and to hope that she would confide to him the extent of her attachment. Ninon smiled, relented, and finally promised : " I will be faithful to you for three months, and that, you know, is an eternity for me." This time she intended no scorn of her lover, and kept her promise to the day.

With this modest substitute for undying love, M. de Rambouillet had to be content, and he gave place in due season to a wealthy rival who amused himself by lavishing gifts of all sorts upon Ninon. She could accept them light-heartedly, for her lover was perfectly well aware that he was buying nothing, and continued to give with equal freedom when his months of favour had become a distant memory. It is a curious tribute

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to Ninon's charms that several other persons did the like, some of whom never achieved any greater intimacy than that of a friend.

Ninon's cheerful cultivation of her special tastes and aptitudes was not greatly troubled by the intrigues of Saint-Sulpice or the murmurs of the court. The times were unsettled, those in power to-day might be exiles to-morrow, and Ninon was confident that she could find a way out of any difficulty, and, at the worst, could contrive to enjoy life in almost any circumstances. Scarron's hope that he might find health in the West Indies proved, on inquiry, a mere dream and he abandoned it with a sigh as he had abandoned so many similar hopes before, taking what comfort he could in the fact that his literary reputation and, therewith, his income were assuming respectable proportions. Ninon heard the news without surprise, and was dispensed from giving another thought to a fancy that could have ended in nothing but misfortune to her no less than to Scarron.

Ninon's Parisian life was too full and varied for her seriously to desire a change. The things she most valued, lovers, friends, music, books, talk she had in abundance. Her mind was at ease, her heart no more than pleasantly troubled. The fire of passion burned to an attractive heat, died down, and was followed by another equally bright and transient. Old friends remained and new ones were constantly, though carefully, added. The jealous world barked a little, but

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it did not seem able to bite hard enough to break the skin. If she had not yet quite succeeded in teaching it to treat her as a young man of honour and wit, that would no doubt come in time, and in the meantime she had no complaint to make of the passing day ; let there be many more such and she would be content.

VI

LOVE

SINCE it was unprofitable to go to America, Scarron presently found a brilliant reason for thinking Paris the best place in the world. Though his paralysis might be incurable, he had several compensations. Neither his pen nor his tongue were chained, and the first brought him wealth and fame, the second, society. Politicians, from Cardinal de Retz downwards, were glad to seek the company of a man who could satirize their enemy, Cardinal Mazarin, to the delight of all Paris, and fashionable ladies were ready to make much of the witty poet whose house was fast becoming a most convenient centre for intrigue of every kind. Among these last was Mme de Neuillant who had on her hands the young Françoise d'Aubigny, a girl of great beauty and wit, but penniless, in effect an orphan, and the daughter of a man who had narrowly escaped the gallows. A fine match was not to be looked for in such circumstances, but Françoise, though hardly yet sixteen, was wise beyond her years, and could be trusted to listen to the voice of common-sense if Scarron should chance to be seriously drawn towards her, as might not improbably be the case, since his crippled state wholly deprived him of attractions in

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the eyes of most women. Nor had life hitherto been so pleasant for Françoise as to make her fastidious about the means of escape to new surroundings.

Mme de Neuillant's schemes prospered. Scarron, always soft-hearted under his mask of buffonery, was touched by Mlle d'Aubigny's forlorn condition, her gentleness, and her beauty. He would give her the protection of his name and house, and, so far as he could, provide for her future. She accepted his offer with gratitude, and no one, not even her mother, cared to object to the inequality of a union between a lovely girl and a helpless cripple who was twenty-five years her senior ; for they knew that in their world wealth and rank were the chief, almost the sole qualifications for a bride.

If, however, Scarron was the only person who was willing to marry Françoise d'Aubigny, he was very far from being the only person who admired her. M. de Méré had known her well before her marriage, and had never spent more delightful hours than in cultivating the mind of this most seductive and deferential pupil, and M. de Miossens, though a later acquaintance, proved no less ardent. Where a pretty woman was to be found Louis de Mornay, Marquis de Villarceaux, usually contrived that he should not long remain a stranger, and of the gallants who fluttered round young Mme Scarron he was the most dangerous. Few women could resist the sombre passion that appeared to consume his soul, to flash from the fierce

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eyes under their heavy eyebrows, and to suffuse the strong features with a sullen glow. To a young girl his reputation as an abundant and successful lover gave him an additional and terrifying charm. But fortune was kind, and Mme Scarron's virtue was not, at this time, destined to be put seriously to the proof.

No friend of Scarron's could fail to hear of Ninon, and what he heard was irresistibly attractive to such a man as M. de Villarceaux. If he did not quite believe that Ninon could in truth rival the delicate, youthful bloom of Mme Scarron, he was nevertheless eager to see whether the magic which the poet claimed that no man could withstand would conquer him as easily as it had conquered others.

Through Scarron it was easy to get an introduction to Ninon, or even an invitation to one of her little suppers. M. de Villarceaux came prepared to be critical. For the first hour or two he was impressed, but not overcome. The radiance of Ninon's wit left him cold, though her friends thought that it had never shone more brilliantly, and that, for the only time in her life, Ninon seemed a little anxious to display her talents to advantage. M. de Villarceaux was thinking of other things, and paid small heed to the conversation that was going on around him. Was Ninon as wonderful, as beautiful, as enthralling, as intoxicating as Scarron had maintained? Though certainly impressed, Villarceaux still hesitated. Then, for a few minutes, the talk got on the subject of painting.

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M. de Villarceaux became interested, and joined in eagerly. He did not speak at any length, but what he said showed clearly that he was dealing with an art that he understood and loved. Ninon, too, loved painting, as she loved all beauty. She listened with admiration and responded feelingly. It was only a moment of sympathy, but it was all that was needed. Ninon speaking of a beauty that he could appreciate became magical to M. de Villarceaux. Once again the spell had worked.

That night was the beginning of something like a new life for Ninon. She could hardly understand her own emotions. This was no fire of straw that was burning in her heart, no comfortable heat that could be trusted presently to die down and leave a few glowing embers at which to warm an enduring friendship. It was a raging furnace whose flames mounted higher and higher every day, an intoxication that thrilled every nerve and blended with every thought, a parching thirst that was never slaked ; it was joy unspeakable, and yet pain and anxiety greater than she seemed ever to have known before ; it was heaven separated from hell by a hand's breadth, a supreme fruition, yet one so dependent on another's will, that it might be snatched from her at any moment, leaving nothing but the torture of longing in its place. She was uncertain, almost humbled, and yet prouder than in the proudest minutes of her life. She had gained a vast treasure that she feared to lose, and

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fear was to Ninon a new, strange, unwelcome emotion.

Villarceaux was not a boy, doubtful of himself, now yielding, now playing the master, to be humoured, petted, guided, controlled ; nor was he a mere gallant anxious chiefly for the fame of standing well with the most adorable, fastidious, and inconstant of beauties. He was a man, passionate beyond Ninon's dreams, experienced in pleasures, confident of his own strength, determined to enjoy, jealous to possess, and now filled with a consuming desire to make Ninon completely his own, resentful of the least hint that her feelings might change, and demanding ever new proofs of ardour and devotion. And Ninon knew that she must submit. To struggle, to attempt to make terms or to impose limits was to lose him. Of much that he said and did she would have been critical in another man. But he was different. She did not wish to criticize, only to enjoy and be enjoyed. She felt as if she could give willingly all that he asked, that it would never be too much, and that she would go on giving for ever and ever ; and because she was so ready to give she would take nothing that might stain the purity of her gift.

Ninon's house was small. Perfectly indifferent to display, she had never had the slightest wish to spend her limited income on providing herself with more room than she absolutely required. In consequence, M. de Villarceaux could not live with her.

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It would have been easy for him to take another and larger house, but Ninon would not consent. She would accept gifts only from friends, and he was so incomparably more than a friend that he must not be ranked as a friend at all. To take anything from him would be to throw a shade on her love, to suggest that, as she also was no mere friend, she was in some sort a paid mistress ; and she knew her lover well enough to feel that he would be very ready to entertain such thoughts, that he had little respect for the honour of women, little belief in their constancy or truth.

Since, therefore, they could not share a house, M. de Villarceaux rented one exactly opposite Ninon's, so that, separated only by the breadth of a narrow street, he could be with her at any instant, and could at all times keep a watch upon her ; for he trusted no woman, not even Ninon. One morning he was looking out of his window and observed that she had lighted a candle. Immediately his suspicions were aroused. Why should she wish to light a candle in the day time ? It would, indeed, be wanted for a blood-letting, but that was an unlikely thing. He sent across to inquire. No, Ninon was not in the doctor's hands. Then it must be to seal a letter, a love-letter. She was getting tired of him ! Was he, after all, only a favourite to be banished at Ninon's good pleasure ? That very day she had been speaking of her love, assuring him that he reigned alone in her heart, that

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she, the notoriously inconstant, had found a love that was her whole life. But what, thought Villarceaux bitterly, was the worth of a woman's vows and protestations. Nothing. Ninon in the arms of another man ! The picture drove him mad. His face grew purple, he tottered and almost fell. He must know the truth, and at once. He turned to snatch up his hat and to clap it violently on his head. He felt a sharp pain and blood flowing into his eyes. In his confusion he had caught hold of a silver jug, and had cut himself so deeply that it was only with some effort that he could tear the sharp edge from his skull. Staunching the wound as best he might, he dashed down stairs, crossed the street in two seconds, reached the door of Ninon's room, and flinging it open, looked round with eager and suspicious glance.

Ninon, who was not writing or intending to write to anyone, began to express a laughing surprise at his noisy haste. Then she noticed his look of fury, and before she could ask what was the matter, he broke out with a torrent of words, accusing her of faithlessness, and demanding to know what she was doing and to whom she was about to write. Ninon listened in pain and perplexity. How could Villarceaux, of all men, question her love ? No one else doubted her and she found it hard to believe that Villarceaux should doubt, whom she loved with such passion that it seemed as if she had never before known what passion was. The pride, the burning love of independence that lay

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deep at the bottom of Ninon's soul were touched. If Villarceaux wanted to hear again that she loved him with all her heart she would tell him so, she would tell him ten thousand times, she could never weary of that delightful theme ; but she neither could nor would make any attempt to justify herself or to explain her actions ; for, in the first place, she had done nothing that needed either justification or explanation, and, in any event, she was not accustomed to explain.

Villarceaux stormed and raved fruitlessly. More convinced than ever that Ninon meant to play him false, he left her with a curse, and returning to his own house, flung himself upon his bed in an agony of despair and baffled longing. After a while he undressed, but he could not sleep. Horrible pictures floated before his eyes, becoming hourly more vivid and insistent. Morning brought no relief. His delirium grew more and more violent, and, at last, his servant sent word to Ninon that M. le Marquis was dangerously ill. She, too, had been passing through hours of agony. At this news she felt in utter despair, until she suddenly thought of a way more effective than any words to convince Villarceaux of her loyalty. Her glorious chestnut curls hung about her shoulders. They were thought her supreme beauty. If she cut them all off and sent them to him, Villarceaux must believe that she could neither pay visits nor be visited by anyone. Villarceaux received the strange gift with speechless delight. Ninon, he felt, did love him

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or she would never have made such a sacrifice to prove it. He was a new man. His fever died away as if he had drunk some magic potion.

Meanwhile Ninon was waiting, devoured by hope and fear. Presently the servant came again to say that M. le Marquis was miraculously recovered. Ninon's eyes flashed, and she trembled with joy. Paying no heed to the astonished servant she darted from the room, and in a minute was at the door of Villarceaux's chamber. She entered. Villarceaux sprang up in bed with a cry, and held out his arms to receive her. Not for a full week did she find time to pass that door again, and never in her life had a week gone so quickly or so pleasantly.

Paris, however, was no place for the love-sick. The unexpected recall of Cardinal Mazarin from exile had infuriated the Parisians and temporarily re-established the languishing fortunes of the Frondeurs. Condé came in haste to Paris, and Turenne, who had been won over by the Cardinal, consented to lead the royal forces. With the two greatest generals in France directly opposed to each other heavy fighting was inevitable, and Paris was likely to become a scene of uproar and bloodshed. Ninon, who had close friends in both parties and took no interest in these substantially unprincipled disputes, was loth to stay for such a spectacle. She did not need the excitement of war and political intrigue which revolted both her taste and her feelings ; for, unlike most of her

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contemporaries, she thought it as painful to witness suffering as to suffer in person. In her present mood she, naturally, set not the slightest store by the various distractions of Paris. Filled with the rapture of a great love, she dreamed of long days when the flood of passion should flow unchecked amid the sustaining pleasantness of country sights and sounds. Her dream was not hard to realize, but even if Ninon had been willing to live at his expense, M. de Villarceaux could not, for his wife's sake, ask her to his own home, and he, therefore, suggested to an old friend that they might be his guests.

This friend, a certain M. de Valliquierville, most readily fell in with the suggestion. In early life he had played an active part in affairs as a follower of Gaston d'Orléans, and had marked himself out equally by daring and by a complete disdain of his personal advantage. He now lived at peace with all the world, content to spend the remainder of his days far from Paris in the society of his friends and his books and in the quiet enjoyment of his ample estate. His house, situated among the genial hills and woods of the Vexin, made an ideal setting for what was, in effect, a prolonged honeymoon, and being unmarried and a man of fine culture, he could both welcome his guests without embarrassment and appreciate Ninon's intellectual gifts. The semi-solitude of his castle had, however, bred a few harmless fancies. He could not, for example, bear to eat anything that had once

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been alive and active, but the meagre diet that resulted from this restriction was for himself alone, his guests were at all times allowed the full enjoyment of an excellent table.

In this tranquil retreat Ninon spent many months, varied, as time went on, by short visits to Paris and expeditions to the not very distant castle of Villarceaux, if it happened that she could go there without offence ; for Mme de Villarceaux not unnaturally resented her husband's continued faithlessness, and would not tolerate that Ninon's name should be so much as mentioned in her hearing, though the event was, finally, to prove that her attitude could change to something, which if not friendship was no longer hostility.

To Ninon these and all other circumstances that did not directly feed her absorbing passion were, at first, matters indifferent. M. de Villarceaux, his love for her, and her love for him made up the whole world. By nature less inconstant than Ninon, though also far less scrupulous to spare the feelings or preserve the friendship of his loves, his passion for her was insatiable, careless of secondary pleasures, and unaffected by time or familiarity. Each was united to the other by a bond that had no existence save in their own wills, but which, nevertheless, seemed indestructible. A slighter, though more obvious tie was presently added. Ninon, to her great delight, became the mother of a boy. It was not perhaps a new experience, for

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she had borne children to M. de Miossens and to M. de Méré, but she had lost them and had begun to fear the prospect of lonely years when youth and beauty were past, and there was no one left for whom she greatly cared or who could care much for her.

Many circumstances added to her joy. Her love for Villarceaux was fittingly crowned, and he was scarcely less pleased that it should be so than she was, proving himself from the first an affectionate father who was prepared to treat her child at least on an equality with his other children, of whom he had several. M. de Valliquierville was also most sympathetic, partly because his friendship with Villarceaux was intimate and of long standing, partly because he was genuinely interested in the child for its own sake, but above all because Ninon herself had won his heart. He loved discussion, especially upon religious topics, and therefore found Ninon a most congenial and inspiring guest. The hours flitted happily by while they ranged over creeds and philosophies in eager pursuit of the elusive truth, seizing now this, now that fragment, and lured on by the hope that with time and patience they would achieve possession of a body of clear, well-founded, and mutually consistent beliefs.

In this amusement M. de Villarceaux took no part. Speculation meant nothing to him. He loved the things that he could see, the beauty of a woman, the strong features of a man of character, the landscapes

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of the Vexin, transferring them to canvas with a ready hand, for he was an accomplished artist. When tired of painting he would hunt, and leave Ninon to her books and talks. She felt this lack of sympathy with her chief interests, but not very acutely. She was used to separating body and mind, and to discovering that the men who appealed most strongly to her senses were not her intellectual equals.

If that had been all Ninon would have resigned, herself, proud that her lover was, at any rate, an artist, and content to enjoy his art even though he remained quite indifferent to her philosophy. But in course of time she began to perceive that there were other matters, even more intimate and personal, on which he did not think and feel as she did. Gradually and by imperceptible stages he was passing from the attitude of a lover to that of a husband. His ardour did not cool, but he became more frankly possessive. He had always been jealous, but now to the anxious jealousy of a lover who dreaded the success of a rival, there was added the confident jealousy of a man who felt that he had earned the right to control her actions and to demand that the first place in her heart should always belong to him. Nor was he prepared to recognize any equal right in her. He loved her, but she was a woman and must submit to his will. Should he, at any time, prove unfaithful, that was a trifle, but that she should ever think of any man save him was henceforth, an insult which must be the end of love.

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From a woman he had never endured, and never meant to endure anything that fell short of whole-hearted devotion.

Ninon did not quarrel, sulk, or show resentment ; she did not even feel it, for she was far too clever to suppose that other people had a duty to share her views. She seldom wished to guide anyone, being satisfied that they should be themselves if they would allow her to be the same. If she had a criticism to offer it was couched in the form of entirely good-natured raillery, and then, for the most part, directed against young men who were still unshaped and ignorant of the world. Convinced that love was perfectly blind, she did not expect to find rare merits in her lovers, quietly accepting the fact that she chanced to love them as a natural, inevitable absurdity.

But M. de Villarceaux's qualities set her a problem, a painful problem, involving something more like an irreconcilable opposition of different impulses than she had ever felt. Hitherto love had died almost as quickly and easily as it had been born. But her love for Villarceaux had lasted, and because it had lasted she must reckon with it, and see how it was going to affect her life in years to come. She could not wait for it to die a natural death. It might never die, or if it did, it might then be too late to take fresh decisions. She must see now what price this love was asking of her, and whether she was willing to pay it in full. Some part of it she would pay lightly enough. The

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bright, varied life of Paris must too often be exchanged for the monotonous calm of Normandy, or some other remote province. Even now Villarceaux grudged the moments spent with her old friends, and he was not likely to become less heedfully jealous in the future. And something more than social intercourse was at stake : the pleasures of thought were bound up with her friendships and must decay with them.

Ninon felt that this was a hard sacrifice, but she also knew that she would make it if necessary ; for love was sweet and worth buying even at great cost, if with that price Villarceaux would be satisfied. Could he be satisfied by anything short of complete surrender and submission ? That to Ninon was the supreme question, for the submission, if made, must be real. Ninon could not feign and preserve her own individuality under the shelter of a mask, and she knew her own nature well enough to realize this. Sincerity was for her a keystone, and if she knocked it out her whole character would fall to pieces. It meant entire surrender, becoming in all but name a docile wife. Otherwise there seemed to be no alternative except to kill her love with her own hands.

While every nerve in her body still longed for Villarceaux, while his presence, his ardent looks, his caressing voice still made the sunshine of her days, she must break loose, face his anger, his prayers and tears, his desire suddenly stricken impotent, his baffled will, and, henceforth, give to him no more

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than the mild warmth of friendship, if he would accept that gift. Could she bear to endure or to inflict such pain ?

For months the silent struggle, the despairing search for some tolerable way of escape, some impossible reconciliation of opposites went on in Ninon's mind. She felt that she could not decide, and, surely, she need not decide yet ! Then, one afternoon, a letter in the handwriting of Saint-Evremond came from Paris. Ninon had not heard from him for a long time, but she knew that he missed her, and she opened his letter, half-knowing the substance of what she would read. It was as she had thought in so far as Saint-Evremond was troubled and hoping for her return ; but with the letter was a set of verses, light, graceful, the best that Saint-Evremond had ever written, and addressed to her. Ninon read them eagerly and found that every word bore upon her present situation and the problem that had been torturing her mind for so many months. It was not in Saint-Evremond's character to be solemn, pathetic, admonitory ; in truth he hardly seemed to advise, and yet it was advice. Ninon read the poem again, dwelling concentratedly on certain passages towards the end :—

*Une paisible et longue jouissance
Fait les dégoûts et détruit la constance ;
Car s'attacher toujours au même bien,
C'est posséder et ne sentir plus rien.*

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The lines seemed to speak only of a weariness that might come to her, a languor of habit that might turn her love into an unnoticed possession. But it was not she who was possessive, or who was most likely to come to feel nothing but the pride of possession, a pride that would itself become a mere habit, felt only when threatened. Ninon turned once more to Saint-Evremond's last lines :—

*Il faut brûler d'une flamme légère
Vive, brillante et toujours passagère ;
Etre inconstante aussi longtems qu'on peut,
Car un tems vient que ne l'est pas qui veut.*

“ *Car un tems vient que ne l'est pas qui veut,*” she repeated. Yes, the time might come, would come, when love on the one side or the other would have sunk to cold ashes, when she would wish to change, and could not.

To go on, to yield her personality more and more to her lover's influence, learning to overlook and to submit ; all this she might do if love were truly and certainly immortal ; but it was not, and in a little time she would be dependent absolutely ; she would no longer have the strength to make a life of her own ; she must accept what her lover cared to give, and that, in the end, might be nothing. She could not be sure of holding a man with whom she had little in common save physical charms ; or, Ninon reflected, even if she could hold him—and in her heart she

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believed that she could—still, it would be mere emptiness if she had ceased to love, and that she could not know ; for love was a madness, sweet beyond all sanity but as transient as sweet ; “ *toujours passagère.* ”

The struggle was over, and to all appearance Saint-Evremond had decided the issue ; but Ninon knew well that it was not so, and that this same decision she must have taken unaided, perhaps only a little later. She could hold Villarceaux as long as she loved him, at the price of submission to his will, but she could never hold him without love, for she could not, like other women, feign love because he was necessary to her ; and because she could not do this she could not take the risk of letting him become necessary to her. She must put an end to her passion while it was still alive because only so could she keep her freedom, and freedom meant more to her than anything else in the world.

Villarceaux at first refused to believe that Ninon intended to go back to Paris and that she did not wish him to accompany her. It was incredible, he maintained, that after the years they had spent together she should suddenly break with him ; she must be in secret communication with some other man, whose orders she was obeying. It was mad to throw him over for the sake of a passing fancy, and it was so outrageously unfair that he would not allow it. Ninon denied that she was going to any other man, but go

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she must and would. Villarceaux stormed and raved, entreated her to stay, painted his own agony at losing her in the most fiery colours, persisted, in the face of her denials, that there must be someone in the background. It cut Ninon to the heart to give him such pain, but she did not waver, though Villarceaux grew more and more furious, and ended by begging her on his knees to give up the thought of abandoning him. Then, at last, he saw the truth. He was a violent man, a strong man accustomed to mastery, but he realized that he was completely helpless against that will of steel. He surrendered, agreed that Ninon should have her own way in all things, that he would not protest or quarrel, but asked that she might allow him to say that it was he who had broken with her. On this Ninon met him more than readily, being quite indifferent whether the world thought she had been scorned, and delighted to seize any chance of making things easier for the lover whom she had been so reluctantly forced to hurt.

Villarceaux felt no gratitude, and left her sullenly, resentfully, despairingly, with unsatisfied passion still burning fiercely in his heart and with an oppressive consciousness that his will had been thwarted, his masculine power defied, and that, henceforth, life would seem very blank.

Ninon returned sadly enough to Paris. Hitherto she had held love's tears and sighs of little account, but Villarceaux's pain had touched her deeply. Her

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passion was by no means dead, though she knew it must die soon, and she asked herself what would be left, and answered, the memory of a great experience and a friendship that should not, by any fault of hers, die while life remained. M. de Villarceaux, however, had one more thing to bear, and he did not bear it without complaint. M. de Miossens, now Maréchal d'Albret, had succumbed to the charms of Mlle de Guerchy, formerly the adored of the Duc de Châtillon. He found her a wayward mistress, and presently grew tired of her jealousies, her malignant depreciation of all rivals, her vanities, her uncertain temper, and her ill-faith. How different, he thought, from his old friend Ninon, the most sincere, generous and amiable of beauties, whose very inconstancy was as open as the day! He was delighted to hear that she had given fresh proof of the last-named quality by leaving Villarceaux and returning alone to Paris, and resolved to seek her out. She welcomed him, at first as a friend, then more warmly, and Ninon's acquaintances soon learned that she was essentially unchanged despite the years she had spent in the country, and that Maréchal d'Albret was established as the reigning favourite.

It was not long before this interesting piece of news reached the ears of M. de Villarceaux. He was furious, and forgetting that he had meant to play the part of a man who was weary of his mistress and who ought to show himself quite indifferent to her love affairs, he loudly accused Ninon of treachery, while

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proclaiming everywhere that he was pleased to be quit of such a jade. Paris guessed the truth, and laughed. M. de Villarceaux's temper was notorious. He had never scrupled to repay by insult any offence given him by a woman, but he did Ninon no hurt. She understood his motives and forgave him without an effort. He was, and should always remain her friend, though he had definitely ceased to be her lover. On both points Ninon had her will. After a short time Villarceaux recovered his composure, accepted the situation tranquilly, and consented to preserve an intimate friendship with Ninon that was broken only by his death forty years later.

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Now that her intimacy with Villarceaux had come to an end Ninon felt that it would be tactless to go on living exactly opposite to him, more especially as he had taken his present house for the very purpose of being as near to her as possible. Accordingly she resolved to look out for new quarters, and her thoughts naturally turned towards the Marais, the district of Paris with which she was most familiar. Presently she heard of a little house in the Rue des Tournelles, a quiet street though within a few minutes' walk of the Place Royale, and by the beginning of the year 1656, she was able to leave Saint-Germain and move into it. At first she was no more than a tenant, but the house so fully answered all her expectations that, after some while, she made up her mind to buy it in order to live there undisturbed for the rest of her days. That this might make it difficult, or impossible, to move to a larger house if her means increased was of no consequence. To Ninon size for its own sake made little appeal, and fashion still less. Her possessions were few and for the most part inexpensive, the burgess desire to accumulate being as strange to her artist's nature as the womanly love of frippery and trivial ornament.

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The accustomed apparatus of life was the best because the least intrusive, and she never had occasion to seek in movement relief from mental vacuity.

Ninon's mind and character had developed during the past few years. The hesitations of girlhood had been left behind. She had drunk deep of the springs of human experience and had found the draught invigorating, though she had tasted the bitter as well as the sweet. Love had taught much, and had not been the only teacher. The hours spent in fruitful, animated discussion with M. de Valliquierville seemed in retrospect to have lost nothing of their charm. Ninon felt that she knew the world, and that the habit of critical, unprejudiced thinking had made thought a pleasure, not the keenest but one of the most inexhaustible that fate had to give. She was eager to continue these delights and to share them with her friends. They did not fail her. In spite of her long absences from Paris and the years of exclusive devotion to M. de Villarcieux, Ninon found it perfectly easy to pick up again the threads of her old life.

The Rue des Tournelles became as popular as the Rue des Trois-Pavillons had ever been, or even more so. From eighty year old veterans of love and war like Maréchal d'Estrées to the young lad fresh from his father's château shyly worshipping a goddess whom he could hardly summon up courage enough to approach, all Parisian society was at Ninon's feet, and the crowd of aspirants to the honour of admission to

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the modest house in the Rue des Tournelles gave her rooms some likeness to a court frequented by courtiers, gayer and less-anxiously self-seeking than were to be found at the Louvre.

Ninon exercised with more than royal freedom the privilege of discrimination. The stupid, ill-mannered, or pedantic found introductions to the Rue des Tournelles hard to win and impossible to use. On the other hand, Ninon avoided forming a clique of persons all of whom had similar views, tastes, and habits ; for she loved variety and would have thought it tiresome to live with persons who were copies of herself or each other. It was scarcely practicable to find a taste or an interest to which she could not respond, and should an acquaintance have no better recommendation she could smile at his oddity ; for a well-marked character, even if it were absurd, pleased her more than a colourless replica of the latest fashions. She knew well that the province of conversation was to illuminate, not to exhaust, a subject, that monologue was an offence, while gossip without the salt of ideas quickly decayed into malicious chatter, that the hostess must be the guide of talk and give prominence and credit to her guests without egotism or partiality.

Her friends met her willingly on her own ground. Conversation was then an art and Saint-Evremond frankly preferred it to reading, as did many others of the most intelligent Frenchmen and Frenchwomen

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of the day. Among educated persons the range of common interest was wide. Few were specialists, and almost as few quite ignorant of the main topics of human concern. They were living in an essentially constructive age. A habit of mind at once philosophical and precise was growing up, and nowhere found more congenial soil than in France. The foundations of the scientific world were being laid boldly and deep, and if men sometimes mistook a plan for the completed structure or expected more from a method than it could give, such mistakes were neither unnatural nor gravely harmful. The discordant energies of the Renaissance and the Reformation were being harmonized and giving rise to great systems of thought and imposing political schemes. The age of crystallization had not yet fully come. Neither life nor science were conceived of in a narrow sense, and hardly any of the world's leaders were following, or could have followed, well-marked paths. They were, in general, pioneers cutting their way through tangled thickets of obscurity, and therein lay their genius in a century more prolific of that quality than any other before or since. Movement was no longer without direction, but it was not yet plain where any path would lead, and only the future could show who had chosen the most far-reaching lines of progress.

Ninon, of course, was no system maker. There was little need that she should be, since geniuses of the first order belonging to almost every country of

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Western Europe had that task in hand. But she was living in the spiritual capital of the world, and able to appreciate both the issues at stake and the personal qualities and defects upon which their fate would ultimately depend. She knew, what has sometimes been forgotten, 'that a work of genius begins and ends with its author,' that no stream of tendency can flow except through individual minds or achieve anything except by means of individual purpose and skill. Upon individuals she could act, and do her share in dispelling the mists of custom and combating the temptation to easy acquiescence among those less personally concerned for the victory of reason than herself.

To reason in so attractive a guise men were unusually willing to pay heed. Ninon did not know how to become a bore. Her criticisms were flashes of insight and wit thrown off as the occasion served ; but men who never expected improvement from her society found themselves gradually changing, and, as they at least deemed it, changing for the better. Lightly and casually as they were uttered Ninon's thoughts cut deep. Love and its concomitants had long been topics of much discourse but little sincere speculation. Ninon wished them to be brought into the full light of day. Nothing was too sacred to appear at the bar of reason, and where such holiness was pretended it was usually a device by which men concealed from others and if possible from themselves egotisms and instinctive barbarisms too ugly

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for exposure. Medico-psychological details were for a later age, but Ninon knew the fact of complexes and divined the cure. She was equally firm in her determination to enjoy sex and in her refusal to be at all obsessed by it. To her mind it had an obvious place in life but not the first in value. It could be made delightful, with due precautions it need never be a source of lasting unhappiness, and there was no sufficient ground for either neglecting its pleasures or ignoring its dangers.

Ninon was in close touch with not a few of the leading men of Paris and her influence grew fast. Once more her foes began to watch and to whisper. She was none the less dangerous because she used only the lightest and keenest weapons. The young nobles of France upon whom in the last resort throne and altar must depend were above all others exposed to contamination. The matter was both a present scandal and a future risk. In such circumstances nothing could be gained, while, possibly, much might be lost by delay. The Prince de Condé was under sentence for high treason, but three years must still elapse before it could take effect, and at any time he might be reconciled to the Government. Should he then be in the least disposed to protect Ninon, his rank and his genius must make his intervention fatally powerful. It remained only to fix upon a definite plan of action.

The priests and their allies communed anxiously over the problem and resolved that they would seize

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the first opportunity to enlist the sympathies and the fears of the Queen. For this purpose the help of some lady who stood well at court was indispensable. Fortunately, ladies who, for one reason or another, felt a strong distaste for Ninon's practices were by no means hard to find ; nor was it at all needful to inquire too curiously into the precise motives for their dislike.

The Maréchale de Gramont, a malignant prude whom her husband unchivalrously described as able to give fifteen and a bisque to Beelzebub, eagerly accepted the opportunity to be of service in so good a cause. A favourable moment for bringing the affair to the Queen's notice soon came, and the Maréchale de Gramont put her case well. Anne of Austria was not the woman to be easily scandalized by a tale of mere amorous vagaries, and passing over these with a light touch, the Maréchale dwelt upon Ninon's unconcealed hostility to the Catholic faith and the disastrous consequences of allowing the young courtiers to learn from her to doubt the things which were equally essential to their personal salvation and to the stability of the royal power. Recent experience had sufficiently shown that criticism was nothing less than the first step towards rebellion.

Their memories of the beginning of the Fronde were too vivid to allow either Anne of Austria or her all-powerful adviser, Cardinal Mazarin, to dispute the justice of this argument, and, in truth, they needed little persuasion. They saw no reason to spare Ninon

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if there was any chance that her activities might prove dangerous. Let her be punished sharply, and in a manner that would once for all consign her to oblivion. The simplest and most effective course would be to order her to retire to a convent, and not, this time, to a convent of her own choice, but to the Madelonnettes, an institution specifically designed to receive young women of scandalous life. There she would be taught repentance by discipline, and be compelled to submit to the watchful control of a pious sisterhood. In the eyes of the Maréchale de Gramont, Ninon was no better, in fact rather worse, than a common prostitute, and must be treated accordingly.

On the following morning, Ninon was surprised by a visit from the Maréchale de Gramont, and some other court ladies, who informed her with an insolent brevity of speech that they had received orders from the Queen to conduct her immediately to the Madelonnettes, and not to leave her until their task was accomplished. Ninon took the blow unflinchingly, and without any attempt at remonstrance, followed her guards, in silence, to the convent, where, after a few words of explanation, she was handed over to the custody of the nuns.

Ninon's spirits rose immediately with the departure of her enemies. The nuns, of course, knew her by reputation, but being neither jealous nor inexperienced, they saw at a glance that she was of another quality from the girls they were accustomed to, and showed a sense of the difference in their manner. Ninon, touched

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by this unexpected kindness, responded to the full, and in a very short time had become the best of friends with her new guardians.

The tidings of Ninon's imprisonment spread rapidly, and so startling a change of fortune everywhere excited the liveliest comment. The pious had anticipated that the Queen's care for morals and religion would meet with such general and decided approval as to drown the protests of Ninon's friends and impose silence upon her secret well-wishers. Some talk, some criticism there must be, but, surely, few would wish openly to defend so shameless a person. The mere fact that her reclusion was by royal authority should count for much, and it might reasonably have been hoped that, after a short time, truth would be acknowledged, and Ninon and her affairs would sink into deserved neglect. But now there seemed little or nothing to promise a speedy fruition of these hopes. Not only was the interest aroused greater, but the voices in favour of the Queen's action were far less numerous and confident than had been expected. Men well advanced in years who would have been shocked by the imputation that they had any sympathy with the "libertins" looked unwontedly glum. Court ladies of the most unimpeachable morals and orthodoxy hinted that if one had regard to the danger of youth, it was not the visitors at the little house in the Rue des Tournelles who were giving the greatest cause for anxiety to their parents. Even Ninon's

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open friends proved not to be limited to one sex, nor chary of giving plain expression to their feelings.

Meanwhile the nuns of the Madelonnettes began to notice an unusual stir in the ordinarily quiet precincts of the convent. Fashionable gallants attended by their lacqueys passed and repassed at increasingly frequent intervals. If two of them chanced to meet they stopped and spoke animatedly to each other. After a while, little groups were formed, then bottles of wine were called for, and someone was seen to be obviously proposing a health which was drunk by all with frantic enthusiasm. Presently a large, coarse-looking man, wearing a torn cassock, rolled into the square, shook his fist menacingly at the convent gate, and audibly invoked every curse from an extensive vocabulary of oaths upon the heads of the scoundrels who had shut up his "goddess" in a convent. The nuns shuddered, for they, like every other person in Paris, knew by sight the scandalous Abbé Boisrobert, the ex-favourite of the great Cardinal and famous author, who, on this as on all other occasions, was accompanied by a youthful page.

The Abbé's violence of speech and gesture had their intended effect. The crowd grew denser, and yielding to a contagious excitement, began to pass from words to deeds. A hail of stones drove the nuns in terror from their various posts of observation. Above the angry murmur of the crowd they heard one shout for a log that they might use as a ram to batter down the

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convent gate, while another as loudly recommended fire, the quickest and most certain means of destruction. In a few moments a thunderous crash proved that the milder suggestion had carried the day. The gate was strong, as befitted a prison, but it could not withstand many such assaults. The convent servants would, no doubt, protect them to the best of their ability, but what could they hope to achieve when opposed by a body of reckless young nobles and their at least equally unrestrained lacqueys?

Ninon took pity upon the terror of her friendly guardians and decided to assuage it by a characteristic expedient. Hastily seizing pen and ink, she wrote a short note, and passed it out through the wicket to her most conspicuous champion. The Abbé read it with a grimace. Scenting mischief, a companion snatched it from him, and it went from hand to hand amid growing laughter. It contained only two sentences : " The nuns are charming to me. I think I shall begin to follow your example and love my own sex."

Anger could hardly survive when the hapless prisoner wrote in so light and cheerful a strain, and, for the time, the attack ceased. But at any moment it might be renewed, and the nuns felt that they could not rest in this defenceless state. They must have the protection of the watch. An urgent message was sent, the watch arrived in force, and the crowd dispersed.

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The respite proved a brief one. By the next evening the young nobles had occupied the square in thrice their former numbers, and each had brought with him, obviously of set purpose, as many lacqueys as he could muster. Rumour grew busy all over Paris. The thing was threatening to assume the proportions of a riot, and none could tell exactly to what it might lead. The nuns were again a prey to anxiety ; if the crowd now collected in the square united to make a determined attack on the convent even the watch could not hope to offer any serious resistance.

A report of the affair reached the Louvre, and like every other piece of significant news, was carried to the ears of Cardinal Mazarin. He was troubled, for he had seen too much of Parisian riots to think lightly of them. It would be a grave matter to have Ninon borne back in triumph to the Rue des Tournelles on the shoulders of her gallants, more especially as the mob of Paris was always disposed to think that a pretty woman must be in the right.

The Cardinal had also a little private anxiety. He knew from bitter experience what a certain anonymous author with a style quite remarkably like M. Scarron's could find to say on the subject of foreign ecclesiastics who, despite beggarly antecedents and a more than doubtful past, had risen high in the counsels of France. He had begun to hope, if not with much confidence, that the effusions of this lamentably popular writer were being forgotten, but he did not know and had

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no wish to learn what higher flights of eloquence in the same style might be achieved under the continued provocation of a gross insult to M. Scarron's dearest friend. It had been folly to listen to the irresponsible and malicious gossip of prudes and bigots. This affair must be settled, and settled at once. To the helpless rage of the Maréchale de Gramont and her pious friends the Cardinal announced that a message was immediately to be sent to the Madelonnettes informing Ninon that she would be free to leave the convent on the morrow. The news of the Cardinal's surrender soon spread from the nuns to whom the message was delivered to the crowd before the convent gate. They hailed it with uproarious delight, and presently went their way, rejoicing in their success, though half sorry that the sport was over, and that victory had been won by such comparatively peaceful means.

The Cardinal shared one trait of character with Ninon, a firm belief in the preciousness of truth ; though, in his case, it was shown by a parsimony of veracious statement that was almost unmatched throughout France. He had not been false to himself on this occasion. True, Ninon was to leave the convent on the morrow, but not merely of her own free will nor to go whither she would. Her freedom was to consist in nothing more than release from the guardianship of the nuns of the Madelonnettes, and before he announced his change of policy Cardinal Mazarin

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had already determined under what conditions she was to live for the future.

On the next day, an officer accompanied by a small squad of soldiers appeared at the convent gate soon after dawn, and informed the nuns that he was the bearer of a royal command by which Mlle Ninon de Lenclos was to be entrusted to his charge in order that he might convey her as safely and speedily as possible to the village of Lagny, where it would become his duty to hand her over to the care of the nuns belonging to the convent of that village. Resistance or even dispute were out of the question, and the sun was still short of its zenith when the towers of Notre-Dame faded from the view of Ninon and her guards.

Some weeks later, the landlady of the *Epée Royale*, the only hostelry in the little village of Lagny, was sitting in her cramped and stuffy office with a pile of papers before her, from which, every now and then, she looked up in order to take a glance at the pleasant spectacle of the convent garden on the other side of the road, where the cool green of the trees in the full and fresh leafage of early summer contrasted agreeably with the parched heat of the courtyard of the *Epée Royale*, and whenever she did so the landlady smiled. Not in her happiest dreams had she seen such bills as she was now making out in solid, glorious fact. Hitherto, the *Epée Royale* had enjoyed the presence of few guests of rank, but the experience of this

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summer had made full amends for the leanness of past years.

The stream had begun to flow a few days after the arrival in Lagny of the beautiful Parisian who was reported to have been sent to the convent by the King's orders, and it had shown a most delightful tendency to increase in volume with the passing of the weeks. Half the young men of fashion in Paris appeared to have discovered that the city was becoming insufferable, and that the only place worth living in was the village of Lagny, which they united in speaking of as a delicious rural retreat, far superior to the bleak Eaux des Forges or the overrated Bourbon d'Archambault. Rooms in constant demand at the most handsome price that the landlady's limited experience could suggest, the frequent drinking of healths, almost all of them coupled with the same name, without regard to the cost of the wines in which they were drunk, were only the chief items in a marvellous sequence of profit that entirely justified the landlady's smiles and the glances which occasioned them.

It had not taken even the least curious of the good people of Lagny many hours to discover the name of the visitor who was destined to bring such unlooked for popularity to their village. Tales of the "incomparable Ninon" had spread far and wide, though the villagers of Lagny had never expected to see her in person, much less to gain any substantial advantage

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from her existence. Naturally, they rejoiced in their good fortune, and Ninon herself was not displeased to be among them. The convent of Lagny was no prison. She could receive visitors, and there was always one or other of her more intimate friends staying at the *Epée Royale*. She did not yet feel that she was in banishment, nor find much practical difference between her present situation and the summers in the country which had often diversified life in former years. It was an additional pleasure to know that the *Maréchale de Gramont* and the other jealous prudes of the court were bursting with anger at the way in which she had succeeded in drawing men after her to Lagny and turning what they had meant for a disgrace into something very much more like a triumph.

The weeks went merrily by, the number of visitors showed no signs of falling, and if Ninon was, now and then, a little downcast at the thought of long, lonesome winter days in this remote spot, her friends comforted her with pledges that they would move heaven and earth to get her back to Paris, and assurances that she need have no fear as to their ultimate success. They promised gaily and in good faith, but, nevertheless, they doubted in their hearts. To Cardinal Mazarin, intent upon the vast hazards of foreign politics, as to the proud and pious Anne of Austria, Ninon was a slight creature who should think herself fortunate to escape by a sojourn at Lagny, however



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prolonged, the just punishment for her vices, and for having in addition, nearly proved the cause of a grave riot. Nor, as it chanced, were special preoccupations lacking by which they might, had they felt any need to do so, have excused their neglect of Ninon's concerns. A woman, almost as remarkable, and much more obviously important than she, had lately announced an intention of honouring the court of France with a visit, and, for various reasons, much care and thought were necessary to secure that she should meet with a reception suitable both to the policy and the dignity of France.

Only a few years had passed since Queen Christina of Sweden, the brilliant daughter of the Protestant hero, Gustavus Adolphus, had amazed Europe and disgusted her own subjects by giving effect to her long cherished design of abdication. Several circumstances lent an unusual piquancy to this event. It had at all times been rare for monarchs to abandon their thrones and it seemed a peculiarly strange step to take in the middle of the seventeenth century, when both the prestige and the absolutism of sovereignty had reached a greater height than at any period since the fall of the Roman Empire. The abdication of Charles V, like most earlier voluntary abdications, was explicable by the fatigue of advancing years, but Queen Christina had hardly yet reached the prime of life, and had contemplated abdication from girlhood. Consciousness of incapacity for her position could

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not possibly be a motive in a sovereign whose natural talents were by common consent equal, if not superior, to those of any crowned head in the world, and who had, in fact, proved her aptitude for political affairs.

On the other hand, though her personal characteristics seemed to afford no explanation of her conduct, they added greatly to its interest. Her ardent and enlightened patronage of learning had made her famous throughout Europe. Her fluent knowledge of no less than eight languages enabled her to converse on equal terms with the natives of every important country, and helped to spread her fame. Great strength of will, a love of power, and almost ostentatiously masculine habits were qualities that to contemporaries seemed to fit Christina for a throne, and also to make the riddle of her abdication more perplexing, a perplexity that was not diminished by the knowledge that, though a young, vigorous, and not ill-looking woman, one of her strongest motives had been to escape the possibility of marriage. Finally, that the daughter of Gustavus Adolphus and the Queen of a fanatically Lutheran people should have found her chief reason for laying down her crown in a desire to join the Roman Catholic Church, and should actually have done so soon after leaving Sweden was not only an amazing circumstance, but had the effect of dividing all Western Europe into her determined partisans and her equally determined enemies and slanderers.

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A visit of such a personage to the court of France must in any case be a most striking event, and might have important consequences to which neither Anne of Austria nor Cardinal Mazarin were blind. On the one hand, they feared that so recent a convert to Roman Catholicism must at heart be sympathetic to Spain, and, on the other, they dared not make her visit an occasion for displaying the Catholic zeal of France for fear of doing harm to the French interests in Sweden. In short, curiosities, uncertainties, fears, and hopes, combined to make the advent of Queen Christina a subject of the liveliest expectation to the whole court of France ; and to all but her friends Ninon's fate must have seemed by comparison a very trifling matter. That the most lastingly important result of Queen Christina's visit might arise in connexion with Ninon can have occurred to no one, and would, if suggested, have seemed mere madness.

Escorted from Marseilles by the Duc de Guise and other nobles, Queen Christina made a leisurely progress northwards, taking nearly seven weeks to come within sight of Paris. On the 8th of September she entered the city by the Porte St Antoine, riding upon a white horse plainly caparisoned. She herself was dressed simply enough in scarlet with a black plumed hat, but was accompanied, as became her rank, by a thousand mounted attendants. The Parisians had eagerly awaited her coming, and she found herself greeted, doubtless to her inward satisfaction, by so

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vaſt a crowd as to make formal ſpeeches of welcome both ſuperfluous and impracticable. The court and the royal family could not, however, be among her admirers, for they were then at Compiègne, and Queen Chriſtina therefore, limited her ſtay in Paris to a rapid inſpection of its moſt remarkable features, in order that ſhe might loſe no time before joining them.

At Compiègne ſhe was received, notwithſtanding her abdication, like a Queen, and was even allowed to take precedence of Anne of Auſtria. Such a reception was, no doubt, chiefly a matter of policy, but both the rulers and the courtiers of France were, in truth, favourably impreſſed, finding that rumour had not at all exaggerated Queen Chriſtina's gifts of mind and character, and, perhaps, done ſomething leſs than juſtice to her physical charms. In particular, her complete maſtery of French and accurate knowledge of the taſtes and habits of individual French nobles appealed to the vanity of a nation very conſcious of its own preſtige and anxious always to be recognized by the beſt judges as a model for the reſt of the civilized world. It was as impoſſible for the courtiers to reſuſe admiration to a perſon of ſuch good judgment as it was for the young king to feel ill-diſpoſed towards a woman who pronounced him the handsomeſt of ſovereigns and who did not hesitate to lend emphasis to her opinion by the frankeſt oaths ; and the Church could not but warmly approve a Lutheran converted to Catholicism, and one who had been firſt

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and most strongly drawn towards her new religion by a passionate devotion to a virtue so eminently Catholic as virginity. During her short stay nothing was left undone to confirm Queen Christina's belief in the magnificence and generous hospitality of the French court, and at the close of September she left Compiègne well pleased both with herself and her hosts.

Queen Christina's purpose was to return to Italy, and courtesy demanded that she should be accompanied on the first part of her journey by an escort of French nobles. Among those chosen for this honourable duty was Maréchal d'Albret, who did not so far forget the claims of friendship as to omit to point out that Lagny was almost on their route, and that Queen Christina would be doing herself an injustice if she lost this opportunity of paying a visit to the famous Mlle de Lenclos. His suggestion met with approval, and, a day or two later, the villagers of Lagny observed that a small, blue-eyed, fair-haired woman with a large, strongly-cut mouth and an aquiline nose was making inquiries at their convent gate. A visitor of the female sex was a distinct novelty, and their surprise gave way to open-mouthed astonishment when they learned that this unpretentious-looking woman was that Queen Christina, once of Sweden, whose name and fame had reached even their ears.

After a little while, she was admitted into the convent, leaving the small group of cavaliers who

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formed her suite to become an object for the silent curiosity of the villagers. They had ample time to satisfy it ; for the hours passed, and still Queen Christina tarried. At length she came out with a broad smile on her face, went up to Maréchal d'Albret and remarked very audibly that his friend was a strange woman ; for she had just offered to take her to Italy as chief lady-in-waiting, and had been surprised to meet with a frank refusal. Then, having called for pen and ink, the Queen quickly wrote a letter, and giving it to one of her attendant horsemen, bade him ride at his utmost speed back to Compiègne and deliver the missive into Cardinal Mazarin's own hands.

The Cardinal received the messenger graciously ; for he had expected some such communication. It was natural that Queen Christina should not wish to leave France without expressing her gratitude for the splendid reception that the French court had given her ; and, doubtless, she had not failed to pay due tribute to its splendour nor to the looks, talents, and manners of its chief ornament, the young King. The Cardinal was not disappointed. Queen Christina wrote as enthusiastically as he could wish of the merits of her royal host and the glories of the French court which she declared to surpass every other court in Europe, her high expectations, and its own fame ; but she added that perfection was difficult, and that even to the court of Louis XIV one thing was still

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lacking, the presence there of the most charming woman in France, the only Frenchwoman upon whom she had thought it just to bestow special marks of esteem, Mlle Ninon de Lenclos. For a moment the Cardinal looked blank. He had been told that this woman was no different from a common prostitute, except that she was more dangerous, and he had consented to deal with her accordingly ; and now Queen Christina, the most learned and brilliant sovereign in Europe, the newly-made Catholic, the avowed champion of virginity, wrote of her in such terms.

The Cardinal would have much belied his national and professional gift of acuteness, if he had failed at once to recognize that prudes had led the Queen and himself into a false position which, if it were obstinately maintained, would end in public ridicule. As to Mlle de Lenclos' coming to court, he did not forget that the King was young and susceptible, but she must immediately be allowed to return to Paris, or to go wherever else she pleased.

The sharpest crisis of Ninon's life was over. Free and quietly triumphant, she resumed in the little house in the Rue des Tournelles her accustomed ways. Hostility she might again encounter, but, henceforth, no one dared to deny her right to be treated as what, in truth she was, a great lady.

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THE attempt to reduce Ninon to the level of the inmates of a house of ill-fame had broken down so laughably as to enhance her social prestige, and with a French aptitude for perceiving the drift of the inconspicuous, her opponents quickly recognized that she was becoming the boldest, the most far-sighted, and one of the most attractive leaders of a great movement that, if unchecked, would ultimately change all the currents of French life from the shallowest to the deepest.

In the early years of Louis XIV, France was still an incongruous mixture, where primitive instincts, mediaeval customs, and new forms of ancient beliefs shared the field in divers proportions. The rude symmetry of the Middle Ages had been little embellished by Italian refinements when the process of evolution towards a society shaped by both sexes in their free intercourse with each other was disastrously subjected to the Wars of Religion. Frenchwomen found themselves deprived of traditional supports, inwardly hesitant, and a prey to masculine licence in a world careless of their needs and still almost purely masculine. Peace brought opportunity for better

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things, and it was not long before Mme de Rambouillet made the Hotel Rambouillet the centre of Parisian social life by initiating that reform of speech and manners which turned into fruitful channels the mental activity generated by the clash of creeds, extended the sphere of feminine influence far beyond the household, substituted conversation for pedantic monologue, refined and clarified the French language, and prepared the ground for the emergence of the various "salons" which were to become a distinctive feature of French society for the next two hundred years.

Mme de Rambouillet met and overcame the usual objections to a novelty. From 1624 until the outbreak of the Fronde in 1648, her rule was undisputed, and she could with polite tenacity impose upon her world the standards of thought and behaviour that she judged best. Her aim was good, her taste in conduct and letters almost unimpeachable, but such social autocrats easily degenerate into the rulers of a narrowing clique, and even Mme de Rambouillet did not wholly escape this danger. When by reason of growing years, the compulsory defection of her daughter, and political troubles, the sceptre at last dropped from her hand, the crowd of aspirants to the vacant throne testified to the extent of her influence, and to the fact that many who had been in appearance devoted subjects were panting to display their own fitness for the position of authority.

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The results were instructive. Mme de Rambouillet had found the French language of her youth slipshod, incoherent, vulgar, quite unfitted for the purposes of intelligent conversation, and had gone far to turn it into a medium of expression admirably suited to the habits of an aristocratic and cultivated society. This was her most striking, if not, perhaps, her most important achievement, and her imitators fancied themselves bound to show that they could be even more refined, subtle, and meticulous of speech than she. Inspired by vanity rather than taste, they, like all copyists, succeeded best in imitating defects. Because the Hotel Rambouillet had developed a special language appropriate to the manners of a group of close acquaintances, they concluded that nothing ought to be said in a plain way, and if they wished a friend to sit down, expressed themselves in the form : " Please satisfy the desire of this chair to embrace you."

Other and more recondite affectations were not lacking. Feminine society cannot dispense with love, and the proper limits of gallantry were from the first a main concern to Mme de Rambouillet, whose taste and piety were alike offended by the prevailing coarse licence, which the example of Henri IV had done nothing to check, and which continued to flourish during the reign of his more decorous son. The problem was, in any case, no simple one. To learn to talk of love in veiled language, to express ardent

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devotion by metaphor and trope might not be difficult, especially if the devotion itself were feigned ; but phrases made cold food for a real love, and those who fed constantly upon them became eager to try warmer and more substantial fare. Sometimes they did so and the misty, wavering fabric of dreams was changed into hard fact ; passion asserted its rights and brought joy or agony as fate willed. But this was seldom, and for the most part they spent their time in elaborating the game of honied words, exalting love all the higher in speech because they could not, would not, or dared not put their fancies to the test, and, it may be, finding in these a true pleasure, subtler and less mixed with pain than the fruition of an actual love. The meaner souls took a different course and loved in secret like men and women of the common world, while careful to pay lip-service to the most refined ideals, and to claim for themselves every merit of the initiated.

A larger number simply kept in the fashion. They neither knew nor cared where they were going so long as the leaders of society went with them ; if they had a choice they preferred the beaten road, but, in any case, they did not wish to be left behind. Long vistas frightened them, and they would be among the first to join a retreat though they would never begin one. Instinctively they shrank from Ninon, who never waited to be told where she was to go, who abominated a mist but seemed positively to like

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gazing at the very farthest point that she could see clearly, and whose habit of always counting the cost, and then paying it without a murmur, had the strange effect of leaving her with very little to pay, rather to the disappointment of many of her less intimate acquaintances. Orthodox and respectable persons who were in course of learning how very hard it was to get beyond the fringe of good society viewed with horrified astonishment the way in which the highest doors flew open at a mere touch from this very free-mannered woman who could boast neither wealth, powerful relations, nor royal favour. Not only the affected, the hypocritical, the timid, and the envious, but also the large class who secretly disapproved of any kind of feminine emancipation were hostile to Ninon, and eagerly sought an opportunity of uniting with the always intransigent clerics to compass her downfall.

M. Jacques Olier, the famous Curé of Saint-Sulpice, had by no means relaxed his conscientious efforts to impose upon all Parisians his own moral standards ; nor had anything happened in the meantime to lead him to forget or forgive the lamentable failure of his attempt to bring Ninon within the grip of the law for her breach of Lenten regulations and for other conduct, almost equally regrettable, if less obviously uncatholic. There could not now be any question of invoking authority, legal or royal—that had been tried at least once too often—but it might be possible to

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open men's eyes to the real tendency of Ninon's activities, and thus to break the spell that she seemed to have cast over them. The fact that Ninon was no longer his parishioner presented a quite inconsiderable obstacle, for M. Olier had more than a parochial reputation, and was a leading spirit in the Company of the Holy Sacrament, a society of unknown membership and great, if declining, influence that existed for the strenuous promotion of good morals and Catholic belief, and embraced all Paris in its sphere.

These various hostile forces quickly found agents suited to their purpose. Direct attack being impossible, it was necessary that one, or more, of the right kind of persons should secure a place among Ninon's habitual visitors, should become minutely acquainted with her ideas and intentions, and should then reveal them to the world with all the convincing detail of truth—such an exposure could not, surely, fail of its effect! If Ninon suspected anything of these machinations she gave no sign. No untoward accident interrupted—so far at least as the world knew—the progress of events, the selected acquaintances duly gained their footing in her circle, and abundant material was rapidly collected. It remained only to make it public.

M. Félix de Juvenel was a practised author, and gifted with a fluency appropriate to his descent from the distinguished lawyer, Juvenel des Ursins. It was he who had chiefly been relied upon to gather the

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facts, and he was, therefore, writing from his own knowledge when he published under the modest title *The Portrait of the Coquette, or the Letter of Aristandre to Timagène*, what was ostensibly a letter of warning from an uncle to his nephew, but, in reality, a more than tolerably voluminous work designed to expose and discredit feminine modernity in all its aspects, with, of course, particular reference to Ninon de Lenclos.

Regarded as an appeal to current opinion, M. de Juvenel's case had its strong points. The movement which had begun at the Hotel Rambouillet might not now seem a grave danger even to the most timid, but Ninon was undoubtedly directing it into paths that would lead to a radical alteration in the accustomed beliefs about feminine duties. It did not need a very skilful advocate to give an air of licence to these new duties, to suggest that an affectation of principle was being used merely as a cloak for boundless self-indulgence, that ideas innocuous in their existing form might contain the seeds of revolution, that the faults of the past had been exaggerated of set purpose, and that those who valued morals, social order, and the just maintenance of feminine delicacy should combine to disavow the intention of far-reaching changes by withdrawing all countenance from their most ardent and unflinching advocate.

On such topics a kind of eloquence was not hard of attainment nor was M. de Juvenel flattering himself when he believed that his work must excite sufficient

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interest among the many who sympathized with his general point of view to make him a conspicuous figure, even if he could not hope immediately to become the acknowledged leader of a popular reaction. For the moment it was enough that he had voiced widespread fears, and furnished the world with an arsenal of facts that might be used to bring home to the careless or ignorant the gravity of the menace to which they were exposed, should they continue to tolerate actions that under the guise of a frivolity too light to be harmful threatened destruction to all that right-thinking Frenchmen held most sacred.

M. de Juvenel's generalities were not so vague as to leave it in any doubt that he drew distinctions, accepting, though with caution, refining influences of the type that had had their origin in the Hotel Rambouillet, while unalterably opposed to the freedom most strikingly and almost uniquely represented by Ninon de Lenclos. His attack was formidable enough to require an answer, and there was only one person who could fittingly undertake the task. Ninon had been pointed out as the chief offender, if she failed to reply she would be letting the case go by default, sacrificing her hard-won prestige, and compromising her future. Her wit in conversation was, of course, the talk of Paris, but as an authoress she was practically unknown ; for she had written little and signed nothing. Could she hope to meet an experienced writer such as M. de Juvenel on his

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own ground ? She had, in any case, no choice but to make the attempt. One thing was clear. It would be ruinous to follow M. de Juvenel through his long-winded and inconclusive arguments on a subject that did not allow of rigid proof, and where the verdict would commonly be given by the reader's prejudices, on whichever side they might chance to be engaged.

A few weeks later the bookshops of Paris exhibited among their newest wares a slender duodecimo entitled : *La Coquette Vengée*. Its purpose was plainly to advise the public of certain matters that M. de Juvenel had omitted from his *Portrait of the Coquette*, and its authorship could hardly be in dispute ; for, though it was anonymous, the heroine described herself as staving off an imminent quarrel by taking her lute and playing a few sarabandes for the company to dance to, an action too wholly characteristic to be attributed to any but one person.

In the form of advice given by an aunt to a country-bred niece who was shortly to experience the delights and dangers of Parisian life, it told the story of two little adventures, such as might happen to any young woman who had not been put on her guard. Somewhat abbreviated, it ran as follows : " My niece," said Eléonore to Philomène, " when you go to Paris be careful to avoid philosophers. I see you don't understand, but I'll explain. When your brother was at college a man often used to dine with you who bowed and smiled incessantly from the moment he entered

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the room, who spoke every language except ours, whose hair was always untidy, his beard dirty, his neckcloth half undone, his cloak torn, and his cassock spotted with fat. Do you remember how you burst out laughing one day at dinner when the footman was going to pour him out a glass of wine, and he kept saying that it was too much honour, with such an endless, obstinate rignmarole of compliments and protestations that he would have died of thirst if your father had not taken pity on him?—you know that he was a teacher of philosophy, but I am not warning you against that kind of man.

Again, you have heard your family speak a hundred times of a certain abbé who lives like a hermit, thinking only of himself, and making no friends for fear that they should expect him to be friendly, who avoids company, and cares for nothing but his dogs and his books—and for his dogs more than his books. They always called him a philosopher, but he also is not the sort I mean. Then, there are other philosophers who are fond enough of company if they can say and do just what they like, who live in taverns, never go to bed sober, and pride themselves on drowning that troublesome mentor, their reason; such people require no condemnation.

But it is not against teachers, hermits, libertines, or any other sort of avowed eccentric and philosopher that I wish to warn you. I am thinking of certain pedants in disguise, drawing-room philosophers with

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ladylike complexions, who choose the shade and avoid all sun or dust, men who sit in delicate arm-chairs, babbling ceaselessly about love but never doing a single thing that could make anyone care for them. You can't imagine how tiresome these creatures are !

When I was still quite a country-bred miss, new to Paris and ready to be delighted with anyone who was kind enough to speak to me, I got to know one of them who was calling on my cousin. He was dressed very quietly, without ribbons or lace, his glossy hat had only a narrow band, his silk stockings had not the sign of a crease, his cloak hung soberly over both shoulders, his doublet was carefully buttoned ; he wore little wristbands and gloves of Grenoble kid ; everything perfectly correct but not exaggerated ; a glance, a smile, a slight inclination of the head took the place of all those studied bows which are, in truth, good for nothing.

There were many other women present, and my cousin introduced him to the company. They did not seem much excited, and I thought it was because they were so interested in their conversation ; for I had heard the visitor praised by country neighbours who had been to Paris. Neither he nor I joined in the talk, which was about a forthcoming fashionable marriage. He thought I despised gossip as he did, and said in a low voice : " We are out of it, but we can talk without disturbing them ; for they are making

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such a clatter that they will never hear us." I made some answer, and as I tried to say everything in a smart way and to use only the latest phrases, he quickly saw that I was from the country, and began to ask me various questions, especially about books, running down Balzac, Voiture, and all the best-known writers. "People," he said in a voice sharp with anger, "are doing nothing but hunt for fine phrases when they might acquire real knowledge. If you will allow me to give you a few lessons I will engage to teach you more in a month than all these chatterers could do in the whole of your life."

On his recommendation I bought certain books called tables, which he explained to me ; and for a time I was a diligent scholar, and always made a point of seeing him alone. One day, however, he found my friend Polixène and her brother Philidor with me and Philidor at once began : "You are making Eléonore so learned that there is no bearing it. I happened to remark that a constant love was the noblest of all the virtues, when she took me up, and proudly explained that I was confusing the passions with the virtues, that love was a passion and could not, by endurance, become a virtue, but only a longer passion. She is always saying things like that. Do help me !" "How can I ?" my teacher answered, "when she is quite right. It is all explained in this little book. See, here is the table of the passions."

"What !" said Philidor, "is that all there is to

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say about the passions ? You have put the ocean in a pint-measure ! Only a line for love ! Faith, she is a tightly-girdled divinity ! It must be a long one if it is going to satisfy all the lovers : ‘ Love is an inclination of appetite towards sensible good considered absolutely.’

“ So if I learn that sentence I shall be a finished lover. I shall, henceforth, win all hearts and be able to praise the beauty of love as warmly as it deserves ? ”

After some more of this, my philosopher, growing angry, left the room. I followed him. He would not admit that he was annoyed, but said that Philidor was a young man fresh from college, and as for his sister, he was much mistaken if she were not a regular coquette. He saw that he could no longer be my teacher. Instead, he would send me one of his old pupils who understood his system as well as he did himself. I thanked him, and we parted.

My philosopher, if he only spoke by the book and in definitions and divisions, had nevertheless one good point : he asked nothing of me nor of any other woman except that we should listen to him ; and a little civil attention was, after all, no more than he merited.

His pupil was not of the same accommodating humour. He wanted to show himself a gallant, and to arouse the love of which he was so fond of speaking. He would sigh ; he would even sing songs, claiming to have composed both the air and the words. He was jealous of all other men, and found fault with every-

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thing they said ; Not one of them, in his opinion, could reason properly ; they were all either block-heads or scatter-brains. Nor did he in the least spare our sex, although it is sacred among men of honour. He criticized every beauty. He was, also, in his own eyes, an admirable judge of feminine wit and character, and made us clearly understand that, unless he approved, our hopes of possessing any kind of merit were vain.

This presumptuous spirit so disgusted all my friends, both men and women, that they contrived a little plot, which, however, they were careful to keep secret from me, because they knew that I would have pitied their intended victim and given him warning.

It was a simple matter for them to find out when he used to visit me, and to come all together at the same time to my room. To my astonishment they at first loaded him with civilities. He was, they declared, the wittiest and most charming of men, one who did everything to perfection. Would he honour them so far as to give his views on some subject of his own choice in a little speech ? He chose the Beatitudes, which he explained at length, while at each pause one or other of his audience whispered distinctly : " Isn't that too wonderful ! " Then they asked him to sing. As he sang he twisted his features into the most dreadful contortions, grimacing like a lunatic, and his voice was as harsh and doleful as his face was dark and melancholy ; but nevertheless they all

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said out loud that after this Lambert and his sister (the most famous vocalists in Paris) would never be asked to sing anywhere.

Amid the chorus of applause Polixène took the opportunity to show him a love-letter which she had received. He would not condescend to read it, declaring that such things were mere trifles which could only amuse foolish and vulgar minds. They all told him that he was quite right, and that men were born for greater things. No one could have been more pleased at compliments or more entirely satisfied with himself ; and he was particularly attentive to Polixène because she surpassed the others in the extravagance of her flattery, and received with an air of the warmest pleasure some sweet nothings that he ventured to address to her. Becoming bolder, he clasped her hand, touched her arm, and finally under the pretence of whispering in her ear, gave her a kiss. Polixène replied with a resounding slap on his cheek.

It was the signal for the conspirators. They rushed at him : one gave him a buffet, exclaiming : “ That is for the philosopher in love ” ; another gave him a dig with a pin : “ That is for the musician in love ” ; a third boxed his ears with a piece of whalebone, saying : “ That is for the poet in love.”

I said what I could in defence of his philosophy, poetry, and music ; but all that I could manage was to get him out of the crowd and open the door so that he might escape.

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As he fled he shouted furiously : “ Coquettes, coquettes, I will have my revenge on you,” and they tell me that when he died, either from his wounds or from despair, there was found among his papers a long and violent attack on women—written under the name of Aristandre—which was published by his heirs at their own expense.

I was annoyed that he should have been treated so roughly in my house ; but I feel that I was to blame for having allowed myself to become intimate with philosophers, that is to say, with men who bring fault-finding, slander, and discord into the most united and agreeable companies. Take warning, Philomène, by my example and be on your guard.

M. de Juvenel’s hopes of fame perished on the instant. He lived and wrote after the publication of *La Coquette Vengée*, but the salons of Paris knew him no more : socially he was in very truth dead.

His cause survived, at least in part. There could be no further question of destroying Ninon’s personal ascendancy. Henceforth she was safe, and if the issue had been merely personal might have retired from the fray ; never again would anyone venture to dispute her right to move among the leaders of Parisian society as an equal, living her own life without shame or concealment. But she had not only made herself secure, she had reversed the position of affairs and put her foes upon the defensive. *La Coquette Vengée* was the first notable victory in the

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long campaign against moral and literary preciosity which culminated in *Tartufe*. In this campaign Ninon, who had no love of publicity for its own sake, made a figure more important than conspicuous. She advised, doubtless, also, she talked and to the point, but there was no need for her to write. Molière was her friend, and, with her usual good luck, she found that the keenest pen in France was ready for use in her cause.

Not more than a few months after the publication of *La Coquette Vengée*, Molière put on the stage of the Petit-Bourbon the *Précieuses ridicules*, and achieved a startling triumph. Many of the most fashionable "précieuses" attended the first performance and joined in the applause, wisely affecting to believe that Molière's shafts of wit were directed solely against their vulgar imitators, an interpretation to which the scheme of the play lent some colour, and which was apparently confirmed by the preface which Molière added on publication. In truth it attested little except Molière's consciousness of a dangerous hostility. Social influence had brought about the suspension of his play after the first performance. It was too violent a measure. The ban could not be maintained, and having the effect of an advertisement, ensured a triumphant second night, to be followed by a run that we might consider normal, but which was then reckoned of extraordinary length, and filled Molière with joy.



MOLIÈRE

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Various literary rivals now entered the field. Somaize, in particular, made himself the champion of those whom he called the “*véritables précieuses*”, abused Molière in violent terms, and did not forget to strike cautiously at Ninon by including her in his *Grande Dictionnaire des Précieuses*, and hinting that she owed her lovers rather to the charms of her mind than of her person.

The battle was fairly joined, but its full scope was not yet obvious. It might have passed for a mere literary quarrel concerned with nothing more vital than the use of language. The keener minds probably grasped the truth, and saw that Molière had dealt a mortal blow at a tone of thought that had long ruled French society, that by discrediting the “*précieuses*” he recalled men and women to sincerity and condemned the type of fancy that depends for its existence upon ignoring the facts of life, and that he would not, therefore, be content until he had laid bare affectation and hypocrisy in all their forms, and driven men to examine the beliefs that they supposed themselves to hold, and the well-sounding maxims in which they were accustomed to give them utterance. Other blows followed in quick succession. The *École des maris* poured scorn upon the old-fashioned, egotistic male who fancied that obedience was the one lesson that women should learn, and declared that the honour of a wife was to be preserved by winning her heart; the *École des femmes*, that from its title

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seemed designed as a counterpart, in fact re-enforced the same lesson.

The storm of vituperation grew louder, but for a time it was Molière's literary and theatrical competitors who made the most noise. Parisian society, observing the marked favour with which the young king treated the humbly-born dramatist, could contrive to hide its jealousy and affect to regard him as the author of brilliant farces whose satire was too wild to be hurtful. If anyone imagined that this attitude would suffice for all occasions they did not understand Molière. The plays he had staged were "Tarts and cheesecakes to what remained behind". Emboldened by Louis XIV's graciousness, he was making ready to put forth all his strength and to stand out unmistakably as the greatest satirist of the age.

Since the days of the *Précieuses ridicules* his association with Ninon had ripened into one of those close and warm friendships to which she was peculiarly inclined. It was no mere social commerce. Molière knew that they were allies, fighting in the same campaign, and he did not make the mistake of undervaluing Ninon's help. He wrote nothing without consulting her, and the more important the play the more valuable was her good opinion. Consequently she became acquainted with *Tartufe* long before it was ready for the stage.

The chief character called to mind an experience of her own with a certain Abbé de Pons, a pious

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“philosopher ” of the type described in *La Coquette Vengée*. Ninon’s picture of his amorous advances and of the smug way in which he justified himself by an appeal to the examples of Saint Paul and Saint François de Sales who were both tempted by demons, filled Molière with the utmost delight, gave him fresh ideas for his own portrait of Tartufe, and led him frankly to acknowledge that, even after he had done his best, Ninon’s exposure of a hypocrite remained unsurpassable for insight, wit, and vigour.

Versailles was nearing completion, and to celebrate the event Louis XIV organized a fortnight of festivities and summoned Molière, among others, to take part in them. On the 12th of May, 1664, the poet ventured to produce the first three acts (the least daring) of the still unfinished play—afterwards famous as *Tartufe*. The king professed himself highly amused, but other people thought differently. The Archbishop of Paris denounced its impiety and persuaded Louis to forbid a public representation. This measure, plainly designed to pacify the devout, did not, however, put an end to performances at court, nor hinder private persons from witnessing the new masterpiece in their own houses. The Prince de Condé was one of those who took advantage of this possibility, and Ninon, though she could not, of course, find room for a stage, gave herself and her friends the pleasure of hearing the completed *Tartufe* read by its author. Nevertheless, so bitter was the hostility the play aroused

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that five years elapsed before it was allowed to appear on the boards of a public theatre.

In the meantime Molière was not idle. Less than three months after the first complete performance of *Tartufe* he put on the stage his *Festin de Pierre*. It seemed an edifying piece. The hero was the traditional Don Juan, a man of wit and power, but an atheist and heartless debauchee. No attempt was made to give an air of specious attraction to his vices. Painted throughout in the darkest colours without one redeeming virtue, he was duly overtaken by celestial vengeance in the fifth act.

The sting of the play was reserved for Don Juan's last significant speech, where he turns to one of the least of his dupes and declares, with a terrible appositeness to the condition of the age of Louis XIV : " Hypocrisy is a fashionable vice, and all fashionable vices pass for virtues. The part of the honest man is the best part that one can play. Nowadays the profession of a hypocrite has extraordinary advantages. The imposture that belongs to this art is always respectable, and even if it is discovered no one dares to say anything against it. All the other vices are liable to incur blame, and everyone is at liberty to attack them as openly as he likes ; but hypocrisy is a privileged vice which closes all mouths and enjoys in peace a complete impunity. By humbug one makes a close alliance with all the humbugs so that to attack one of us is to have all the others on your hands ;

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and on top of them those whom one knows act in good faith and who have been genuinely shocked ; for they are always the dupes of the others, walking straight into the traps of the humbugs and supporting them blindly. You could hardly guess how many people I know, who by this trick have cleverly made good the scandals of their youth, making a shield and a cloak of religion, and under this honourable dress have got licence to be the vilest men in the world. One may see through their intrigues, and know these folk for what they are, but their reputations do not suffer for it ; a humble bow, a sanctimonious sigh and a little turning up of the eyes make everything they do right in the opinion of the world. Behind this excellent shelter I and my affairs will be in safety. I don't propose to give up a single one of my pleasant habits, but I shall take care to keep hidden and to amuse myself quietly. And if I should happen to be found out, I shan't need to stir, but I shall see the whole party coming to my help and defending me everywhere and against everyone. In short, it is the way to do just whatever one likes without any risk. I shall make myself a judge of other people's ways, condemning them all and only thinking well of myself. If anyone gives me the slightest offence I will never forgive him, but will quietly hate him always. I will play the avenger of insulted religion and under this convenient pretext I will fall on my enemies, accuse them of impiety, and turn against them the foolish zealots who,

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without knowing anything of the matter, will overwhelm them with abuse and boldly damn them on their private authority. That is the way in which a wise man profits by the weaknesses of mankind and suits himself to the vices of the age."

The battle was not quite at an end, but the issue could no longer be doubtful. The rational "libertins", among whom both Molière and Ninon must be reckoned, had triumphed decisively.

IX

MADAME SCARRON

NINON did not allow the interest of a cause to overshadow the amusement of living or the cultivation of friendships, new and old.

Scarron's marriage to a beautiful girl who was twenty-five years his junior and who made hardly a pretence of being in love with her husband had not proved the disastrous failure that might have been expected. Françoise d'Aubigny had received from nature a handsome portion of quiet thoughtfulness, an endowment which advantageously took the place of more tangible assets, and which the peculiar conditions of her wedded life only served to increase. Lacking neither feminine charm nor the lighter feminine emotions, she aimed at making these subservient to her strongest passion, the desire justly to appreciate the world's demands and by so doing to win its unqualified esteem. She loved society, but she loved it with discretion, seeing clearly the part best suited to her, and always intent upon playing it faultlessly.

As the wife of a burlesque poet she did not make the mistake of affecting too strict a standard, despite some natural inclination towards the manners of a Mother-Superior. A very young and pretty woman,

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married to such a man as Scarron, must, notwithstanding the nominal character of their union, tolerate his idiosyncrasies ; they were an essential part of the picture, and could not be suffered to give rise to a glaring contrast. Mme Scarron would have shown herself lacking in good sense and would have incurred general ridicule by a display of religious zeal or by an austere contempt for gallantries that were sometimes bold.

It was impossible to ignore Scarron's friends or to treat them as a petty clique. To a nucleus of literary rivals or colleagues he had joined men of fashion, believing and other, ex-frondeurs, partisans of the court, abbés, who, like their host, might be rather of the world than of the Church, and some representatives of Parisian birth and beauty. Scarron ranked as a "*frondeur*" and a "*libertin*", but his hostility to the Court was no longer inspired by hope nor envenomed by poverty, and in matters religious his freedom was chiefly of the tongue ; for, at heart, he had never diverged widely from the orthodox faith.

Mme Scarron made tactful use of this variety, discouraging without emphasis the visits of one or two of the least reputable of her husband's friends, such as the Abbé Boisrobert, and giving modest hospitality to the rest. She was perfectly aware that many of them came for her sake. Gallantry was universal. A pretty woman who allowed no man to profess to be her lover would have been thought a

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tiresome prude and might have found herself exposed to the most malicious insinuations. Mme Scarron fell in with the prevailing custom quite complacently ; for, in truth, she loved the admiration of men only less than esteem and power. It was a marvel to see how so young a woman contrived to unite warm encouragement with the finest sense of social propriety, never giving more than due licence to her wit, never pedantic in displaying her various accomplishments, and yet never the inexperienced, burgess wife. In dealing with persons of her own sex she was equally skilful, and quickly proved that the social reputation which had been won by Scarron's growing wealth and literary fame would be maintained, or, rather, increased by his seemingly hazardous marriage.

Absorbed by her passion for Villarceaux, Ninon had, at first, little concern with all this, but immediately after her return to Paris she resumed her natural place as one of Scarron's oldest and most intimate friends. Mme Scarron never dreamt of objecting. Ninon's views and conduct might be the last word in unorthodoxy ; she was Ninon or, when she pleased, Mlle de Lenclos none the less, and Mme Scarron was far too acute not to recognize it.

For her own part Ninon was quite willing that acquaintance should grow into friendship at the earliest possible moment. It was a pleasure to find in Scarron's bride so congenial a spirit, to discover that she had not only youth and beauty, but charm, wit,

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learning, and the most delightful manners, and that the wide difference of years was no bar to intimacy or the growth of something like a sisterly affection. Ninon's heart went out to a girl who combined a deep fund of good-sense with all the graces, and she watched with sympathetic amusement the progress of her many little love-affairs. In truth, she had a right to feel for some of these a double concern. The admiration of M. de Méré was quite an old story, and hardly less so that of Maréchal d'Albret.

M. de Villarceaux, too, had remembered where to find consolation for Ninon's fickleness. His three years' infidelity cost him nothing. Mme Scarron's charms were far from having diminished in the interval, and his earlier wooing had been too slight a thing for her to wish to punish his long preference for Ninon by an affected coldness ; more especially when he now made up for it by an ardent and sustained devotion. None of her lovers, perhaps, was so much in earnest, and none certainly got so near to touching her heart. She could forgive the handsome Marquis conduct that she would have resented deeply in anyone else. He was not the man to be content with smiles and sighs and tender glances. Rumour quickly hinted that he could have boasted less meagre prizes but for Mme Scarron's anxious discretion. This last, at any rate, was beyond dispute. Villarceaux might ask, and if she refused he might ask again, but whether she continued to refuse must in any case

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remain an inviolable secret from the world. There could be no question of committing herself openly after the manner of Ninon.

Villardeaux, with more delicacy than was usual in him, bowed to Mme Scarron's will so far as to keep silence, but he could not resist trying to force her hand in another way. He made use of his skill as an artist to paint a compromising picture in which Mme Scarron was represented as having just stepped out of her bath. Was it fancy portrait or painted from life? Few, if any, could answer then, and no one can do so now. Mme Scarron might have been expected to scent an affront, but Villardeaux was privileged, and their friendship suffered no breach. Such conduct only made the problem of their relations more fascinatingly obscure, and Mme Scarron's destiny came near to giving it European importance; it remained, none the less, unsolved. One person may have known the full truth. If either party had wished for a confidant they would have made Ninon their first choice. She was intimate with both, perfectly devoid of jealousy, pleased with all intelligent love-affairs, profoundly acquainted with the world, and of faultless discretion. But if she knew it is certain that she never spoke. In the course of her long life she learnt many strange secrets and betrayed none. In this case, perhaps, she only suspected, and thirty years later hinted her opinion to Saint-Evremond, while being careful to disclaim all knowledge.

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M. Scarron watched as much of these affairs as came under his observation with an ironic smile. He knew his Paris, and, far from taking offence, used to persuade his wife to show him her love-letters and then suggest improvements in them from the point of view of effect and literary style. No doubt he felt a pleasure in recalling that with the pen he was superior to the most well-formed and cultivated gallant. He seldom, or never, found fault on the score of boldness; for he hated affectation in word or deed, and if a broad jest were made on the subject of his wife's admirers he was as likely as not himself to be the author of it. The situation was not altogether such as he would have chosen, but he had learnt to expect little from life, and when he felt any passing sense of neglect a chat with Ninon was enough to console him; she, at least, was invariably sympathetic, kind, and entertaining. Not that Mme Scarron gave him much cause for complaint. Without making any show of passion for her deformed husband, she was an attentive and dutiful wife, so that to the end of his days Scarron could believe that he held a considerable, if not indeed the highest, place in her affections. Probably no one doubted it; for Mme Scarron did not wear her heart on her sleeve, and it was not until many years later that she allowed even her most intimate friends to guess that she had regarded her first husband not merely with indifference, but with positive distaste.

She was not compelled to endure the burden very

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long. Early in the year 1660, Scarron's health, always precarious, began definitely to fail. His spirit was not daunted, but if he still had hopes his doctors had none, and in the autumn of the same year he died. He did not forget to leave some mock legacies to his acquaintances, indicative of their various foibles, nor to write for himself a pathetic epitaph in which he asks the passers-by to walk gently near his grave, lest they wake him from the sleep of death, the only true and unbroken sleep that he had ever known. Ninon might long regret the sarcastic, impulsive cripple who had always been constant to her, but otherwise he was soon forgotten in the rush of Parisian life.

For some years Scarron had enjoyed a rather large income, and he had always wished to make ample provision for his widow, but he was incorrigibly careless of expense, and to her great disappointment, Mme Scarron found that his debts exceeded by many times the available estate, and that she could only figure as a creditor for twenty-three thousand francs under the terms of her contract of marriage. At best it was a meagre claim. She could not hope for more than five thousand, and, in fact, received nothing.

A convent was the obvious refuge for an impecunious widow, and Mme Scarron chose one with which she had been familiar in her youth. Here she was furnished, none too willingly, with the necessities of life by wealthy relations of her own and her late husband. She had no design to take the vows, nor

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did her hostesses expect it of her. It was quite understood that she had merely sought out the most reputable lodging, where she could still see her friends without let or hindrance and reduce to the narrowest possible limits her dependence upon the grudging charity that pride would have bid her forego.

Her connexions were soon relieved even from this light tax. Ninon came forward to beg Mme Scarron to live with her in the Rue de Tournelles and not feel that there need be any term to her visit. The offer was joyfully accepted, and Ninon had no reason to repent of her generosity. She found Mme Scarron a most congenial inmate, so much so that they were supposed to have shared the same bed for months together ; though if this be true, Ninon must have sacrificed for her friend something that was dearer to her than money.

Superficially they were not unlike, for both had wit, learning, tact, discretion, beauty, and knowledge of the world. Ninon recognized, perhaps over-estimated, the similarity, and tried to make it complete. Mme Scarron was a friend, why should she not become a friendly rival by adopting Ninon's own principles and mode of life ? It was rather a startling suggestion but by no means patently absurd, and Mme Scarron hesitated. She acknowledged that Ninon was happy, the happiest woman she had ever met ; that her pleasant, untrammelled, wholly independent existence was somehow perfectly in accord with the tone of good

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society, so that she not only enjoyed very general respect but seemed well on the way towards becoming a social queen. To Mme Scarron this last circumstance was vital. She could bear to be inconspicuous, never to be despised. On no consideration would she risk the sort of ostracism which was the common fate of persons who lived in Ninon's style. The question was, could she hope to keep her reputation on Ninon's terms, and by Ninon's methods? If at first sight it seemed possible, a more penetrating survey discovered fatal obstacles. To Ninon the approval of the world was in itself nothing. She used it exclusively as a means to personal relations, artistic pleasures, and intellectual adventures. So far it was, doubtless, valuable, and she would pay the price liberally in care for social details, but never by an essential sacrifice. Her independence of spirit brought its own reward, and she found that she could placate the world at her own time and in her own way. Had she been playing a part, the world would have recognized her insincerity, eagerly grasped the opportunity to make her feel its power, and punished her half-hearted rebellion with contempt.

Mme Scarron was a superb actress, but she knew that she could not hope to imitate nature to perfection, and nothing less would serve. To live as Ninon lived without her particular moral and intellectual gifts must, in any case, be difficult; to seek to do so on a basis of pretence was impossible. Even had it been

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possible, Mme Scarron doubted whether she would have been wholly content with Ninon's lot. Her fears and her ambitions were fundamentally different. Ninon's religious speculations left her cold, but she did not so easily put aside the admonitions of the priest, caring less for truth but much more for the feeling of certainty, ready to trust common opinion, and chary of dangers that might be real though unproven. You could not be Ninon and pious as well. Mme Scarron knew that in her heart she was afraid, while Ninon was perfectly free from religious terrors, and made no scruple of saying that people were very much to be pitied who could not conduct themselves rightly without the help of religion : they must either have a very limited intelligence or a very corrupt disposition.

To Ninon physical passion was the salt of life ; Mme Scarron hardly knew what it meant. She loved power and especially to use power for what she could feel was a good object. In her eyes the greatest charm of social intercourse was the opportunity it afforded for guiding and helping her neighbours. She was eager to provide means to all who lacked them, if only she might also direct their course ; the idea of encouraging her friends and dependents to work out their lives in their own way hardly so much as rose above her horizon. The pleasures of a female director of souls would not prove easy to unite with such a career as Ninon's. Mme Scarron could not be expected to foresee the irony of events or to guess that

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Ninon's influence upon the minds of her younger contemporaries and upon French social traditions might be wide and permanent enough to gratify the most ambitious nature.

Mme Scarron, however, was not left to consider her problem merely in the cool light of reason. Time had not diminished M. de Villarceaux's taste or capacity for the sieges of love, and a widowhood spent in the company of Ninon gave him the most admirable opportunities for prosecuting an enterprise that had never looked hopeless, more especially as Ninon, if she did not actively assist, observed the affair with indulgent eyes, and would not have been sorry to see Mme Scarron make this the first step in a course of gallantry. It was not that, whatever else it may have been. Mme Scarron's prudence never slept. The year after Scarron's death her immediate necessities were relieved by a pension from the Queen-mother. She was still young. To a woman of her ability the future might bring much, and she was not going to compromise it by outraging convention in a style that only Ninon seemed able to practice with impunity.

Neither this resolve nor the change in her circumstances clouded Mme Scarron's friendship with Ninon, but their paths in life gradually diverged. There was no further need for them to live together, and Mme Scarron hired a room in the Ursuline convent. Her income was modest, but Maréchale d'Albret, Mme de Montespan, and many other

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persons of distinction were among her friends, so that life was pleasant if not purposeful.

At length her opportunity came. Louis XIV wanted a discreet, intelligent, and tactful woman to look after Mme de Montespan's expected baby, and any others that might follow. The sequel is familiar. Mme Scarron accepted the post, got into touch with the King, earned his regard, became his confidential adviser, his friend, and eventually his wife. At hand on every momentous occasion, yet never in the front of the stage, with more power than most crowned Queens of France, and free from the trappings of royalty, yet unable wholly to escape its less tangible restrictions, widely honoured, still more widely envied, loved, perhaps, by a few, a mystery to all, Mme Scarron lived through the years that have won her historic fame, so as to leave even her own brother in ignorance whether the much desired fruit had proved sweet or bitter in the eating.

No one could suppose that her life was easy. She was still playing a part. She had never loved her first husband, nor did she learn to love her second, king and man of ability though he was. She showed herself a devoted, unwearying counsellor, but the burden of trying to amuse a man who could no longer be amused often seemed intolerable, and Mme de Maintenon's thoughts turned, not unnaturally, towards Ninon. She, if anyone, could achieve the impossible. Would she, Mme de Maintenon wondered, consent to accept

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some honourable office at Versailles with the implied obligation of living there and helping to entertain the King? Fortunately they had never ceased to be friends. They wrote to each other, and, now and then, Ninon had paid her a visit, though always with the strictest privacy; occasionally she asked a favour for some intimate, but that had been exceptional. Mme de Maintenon felt that she could venture to speak of her plan at the next opportunity, though without any great hope of success. She was not deceived. Ninon smiled the suggestion away. To visit Versailles was one thing, to come there openly and to live was quite another. Civility forbade the expression of her thought; was she, in her old age, to run after names and baubles, to exchange her truth and freedom for the constraints, the hypocrisies, the thinly disguised servitude of Louis XIV's court! It had never been her custom thus to mistake shadows for substance.

So far was Ninon from being envious of her friend's greatness, or blind to the price at which it was bought, that she held the Marquise de Maintenon, the wife of the proudest king of Christendom, less happy than Mme Scarron might have been in a little house in the Marais leading the life that she had once proposed to her.

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By the romantic imagination of later days Ninon has sometimes been pictured as an immortal, Aphrodite descending once more from Olympus, unchanged and unchangeable, and to the soberest of her friends the truth grew to seem not very different. But in her own eyes she was never magical nor exempt from the sway of the unrelenting years. If time touched her with a light hand, it dealt roughly with the world that had shared her youth. Old friends and old enemies passed from the scene. Cardinal Mazarin, still diplomatic, however unwillingly, in his death, yielded at the earliest suitable moment, the first place in France to his royal pupil. He, perhaps, had been almost as little a foe as a friend, but there could be no question about the feelings of M. Jacques Olier, who followed him, after the lapse of a few years, to the grave.

Ninon could less easily spare a worse man. The Abbé Boisrobert fell sick, his end was near, and the priests gathered round him. He, too, was a priest, he would not turn from the consolations of the Church nor listen otherwise than patiently to her rebukes ; he did not deny that they were in some sort merited. At the last he joined his hands in prayer and confession of

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his faults : " I acknowledge, O God, that I am a great sinner, and I ask Thee to forgive me ; but Thou knowest that the Abbé de Villarceaux is still more wicked than I am." The Church had, perforce, to be satisfied with this equivocal repentance. Of his beliefs it could speak with no greater frankness than of his conduct. With Cardinal Richelieu, a Prince of The Church, he had been a favourite, but hardly for his piety. Everyone knew that he called Ninon his goddess, and that his chasuble was, as the saying went, one of her petticoats. It betokened no romantic devotion, for he was an elderly and experienced Parisian, but it was small testimony to his faith. Ninon, at any rate, had found him a loyal friend and repaid him in kind.

Not long afterwards, Ninon lost another, a younger, and, in one sense, a more intimate friend. Philippe de Clérambault, Comte de Palluau, lived to become a Maréchal of France in spite of the fact that he died before he reached the age of fifty. In history he could leave no mark, but Ninon did not forget, and in her memory he survived, a pattern of all that a French noble should be, unparalleled by the aspiring degeneracy of the next age, a lover, a soldier, and a wit, who could charm alike her heart and her intellect and deserve the respect that she was always ready to pay to manly courage.

During these years death struck with neither more nor less than its usual blindness, but life, in particular

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the life of Paris and of France, was being consciously refashioned to an extent that marked a fresh paragraph in the long story of human affairs. The Fronde, though not distant in time, seemed with its confused liberty and self-assertion to belong to an alien epoch. Even while Anne of Austria still lived the "good days" of her Regency began to look a trifle historic. The young King had different ideas and quickly brought new men with new methods to the front. Order, activity everywhere directed by trained intelligence, and, as the source and centre of the whole scheme, the authority of an absolute monarch were the principles familiarly summed up in the phrase—one that Louis XIV in fact never used—"l'état c'est moi." The apparent favour, arrest, trial, condemnation, and imprisonment of Fouquet gave to the victory of these principles a strikingly dramatic and personal form, and taught a lesson that no Frenchman, however daring or highly-placed, was able to forget.

By a strange chance the blow that crushed Fouquet also shattered the fortunes of Saint-Evremond. Most historians would now admit that Cardinal Mazarin was fully justified in concluding the Peace of the Pyrenees, and that the cessation of an exhausting war was of more real advantage to France than any increase of territory that might have been won by prolonging hostilities. At the time, however, many patriotic Frenchmen, and among them Saint-Evremond, regarded the Peace as a characteristically timid and

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treacherous betrayal of French interests. Accordingly, Saint-Evremond wrote a mordant satire on it which he sent to his friend, the Marquis de Créqui, knowing that both he and Clérembault would approve and admire. They did so, and then returned the dangerous missive to its author's own keeping. There the matter rested for a while. But Saint-Evremond was commanded in the summer of 1661 to follow the court to Brittany, and, looking about for a safe person with whom to deposit his private papers, selected Mme du Plessis-Bellière. He could not have chosen more wisely, or, as the event proved, more unfortunately. No woman in all France—not even Ninon—surpassed Mme du Plessis-Bellière in courageous, unwavering loyalty to her friends, and she ranked Saint-Evremond as one of the closest. The first place, however, belonged unquestionably to their common intimate, the Surintendant, Fouquet ; but as he was still, to all appearance, in high favour with the King, this seemed, if anything, an additional security.

While the court was in Brittany, Louis XIV dropped the mask, Fouquet was arrested, and his papers, together with those of Mme du Plessis-Bellière, among them Saint-Evremond's satire, fell into the hands of the Government. Saint-Evremond's handwriting was as well-known as his style. There was no possibility of denying his authorship, and Louis XIV resolved once for all to make it plain that the days of "frondes" and "mazarinardes" were over. No

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one, however considerable their merits or abilities, could be allowed to criticize his government. The first duty of a subject was to obey in silence, and the very fact that Saint-Evremond had been loyal when others were in rebellion would make his present disgrace all the more impressive. Louis XIV could not, however, give instant effect to his will, since, as soon as the news of the arrest of Fouquet reached the court, Saint-Evremond, fearing to betray his grief to curious eyes, had gone on a visit to M. de Clérambault.

Presently the two friends, quite unconscious of any risk, set out on their return to Paris, and proceeded cheerfully on their journey until only a few hours' riding separated Saint-Evremond from the certainty of lifelong imprisonment. But he had friends as well as enemies in Paris. Political excitements did not interfere with Ninon's loves, and the reigning favourite chanced to be M. de Gourville. Such affairs had hitherto played little part in the busy life of the ex-valet, who had fished to admirable effect in the troubled waters of the Fronde, winning by his shrewdness and devotion the esteem of his master, the Duc de la Rochefoucauld, one of whose daughters he ultimately married, giving evidence of diplomatic talents which were to secure him a highly distinguished official career, and not forgetting to amass for himself a respectable fortune. In furtherance of this last object, he took advantage of a leisure moment, as he proudly narrates, to seize and hold to ransom a burgher of

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Paris, who not only had the merit of wealth, but who also chanced to have given him some slight offence ; nor, when peace was restored, did M. de Gourville neglect to make full use of his position as a known friend of M. le Surintendant.

Fouquet's arrest brought trouble upon him, but before taking refuge in the country of the Duc de la Rochefoucauld he contrived to sleep one night in Paris. He learnt of Saint-Evremond's danger, and realizing what this meant to Ninon, took thought, in the midst of his own anxieties, to guard against it. When they had hardly passed Orléans, Saint-Evremond and Clérambault received from a confidant of M. de Gourville's so emphatic a message as to send them flying in hot haste to Saint-Evremond's native province. Clérambault was in no personal danger, unless his present defiance of authority should be reckoned fit cause for punishment, but Saint-Evremond was compelled to wander about Normandy from one hiding-place to another until, seeing that he had nothing save the Bastille to expect if he lingered in France, he made his way, cautiously and by devious routes to the Netherlands frontier, and thence into Holland.

He was safe but ruined. His career was broken, and forty-thousand livres of private property in France were lost to him for ever. He did not much repine. With numerous friends and the gift of making himself at home in most places he could share Clérambault's

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philosophic contempt for the vagaries of fortune. That friendship itself should often grow chilly when royal glances were cold caused him not the least surprise—he had not waited five-and-forty years to begin to know the world. He was content to find that some few intimates came safely through this test. Lionne, Créqui, Clérambault were among the most tireless in urging Louis to pardon, but without effect—royal pride and the long-breathed malignity of Colbert formed an insuperable barrier.

Ninon was fatally hampered by circumstances. Etiquette forbade her appearance at court—officially she was a prostitute—and only by direct appeal could she have hoped to touch the young King's heart. And even then she might have failed. Her long and close friendship with Saint-Evremond was at an end, save in so far as it could be carried on by means of letters. She remembered always, but she did not at any time sentimentalize the situation. Life was there to be enjoyed if possible, and she intended to continue enjoying it. Saint-Evremond ran little risk of misunderstanding her point of view. He was, in fact, doing precisely the same thing himself, under considerable present difficulties but with great ultimate success.

The means of enjoyment were still abundantly at Ninon's disposal. Armand de Gramont, Comte de Guiche, though almost young enough to be her son, did not aspire to a merely filial relation. Was he not

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conscious of being the hero and unattainable pattern of every budding courtier, the lover of her secret dreams to every competent beauty, all the more, perhaps, because of his somewhat notorious indifference to female charms? Spoiled and flattered from boyhood, living in close intimacy with the wildest gallants of the French court, made by the union of birth, beauty, and personal charm scornfully oblivious of all customary rules and restraints, he more than once skirted the edge of disaster, and those who cared most for his welfare proved the slowest to regret that he early became an assiduous visitor at the little house in the Rue des Tournelles.

Ninon gave him of her best, and Saint-Evremond had time to note with amusement that Guiche, like Condé, discovered that Ninon possessed the secret of lending ardour when nature had been ungenerous. From Ninon he could learn many other things of more lasting service to him, but fate did not will that she should see the petulant and splendid boy turn into a brilliant man. Like every young noble he was a soldier. In the campaign of 1672, he was stationed with his squadron on the Rhine. The enemy were on the opposite bank, and he was told to look for a ford. Finding none, he nevertheless sent back word that the passage of the river could be made, swam across at the head of his troop, fell sword in hand upon the enemy and defeated them. Success triumphantly excused an act of indiscipline, and Guiche became as

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much the hero of the army as he had been of the court. Too soon he experienced the proverbial inconstancy of fortune. A defeat by so skilled a general as Montecucculi was scarcely a reflexion on his courage or conduct, but he could not bear the change, and making little effort to recover from his wounds, died before he had completed his thirty-sixth year.

A passion for Ninon was no mark of singularity among the youths of the day. In the Duc de Vivonne the opposite would have been singular, so closely did his tastes and aptitudes match with hers. A brother of Mme de Montespan, whom he resembled in the brilliance of his conversation if not in looks, a near friend and almost an exact contemporary of Guiche, he easily persuaded himself that his close, though unofficial, relationship to the King would secure pardon for any escapade, however daring.

By an odd coincidence, his most notorious freak recalls one of Ninon's early adventures. His belief in the Catholic Faith was much on a level with hers, and he gave expression to it in a similar manner. He particularly disliked any hint of asceticism, and being young and heedless, elected to invite Guiche, Bussy-Rabutin, and a few more of his special cronies to a Lenten bachelor feast—the last particular a variation on Ninon's practice which was far from proving well-advised, and which Vivonne himself might have scorned had he then been acquainted with the charms of the Rue des Tournelles.

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The chateau of Roissy was to be the place, the three days before Easter the time of meeting. What happened during those three days speedily became food for much excited and discordant talk. Some spoke of an impious and shockingly immoral orgy, studiously and cynically contemptuous of every canon of virtue and good taste. Others maintained that so far from purposing insult and debauch Vivonne and his associates had duly observed the Good Friday fast, and had done nothing worse than enjoy on the Saturday a dinner at which perhaps a little too much wine was drunk and a few youthful bravadoes uttered. In such cases the truth is more than usually apt to lie in the mean, and Cardinal Mazarin at any rate, was not satisfied that the affair had been altogether harmless. He marked his displeasure by relegating the offenders to various places more or less distant from Paris and from each other, condemning Vivonne—rather humorously—to detention in the very chateau where the feast had been held.

It was not to be expected that the brother of Mmede Montespan should long remain out of favour, and Vivonne had too much wit and good sense not to take advantage of his opportunities. In the Rue des Tournelles he could learn admirably the difference between freedom and indiscretion, and his youthful escapade did him no permanent harm even in orthodox eyes.

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Later, he became an intimate friend of Mme de Sévigné, who narrates how he came to her one day at Saint-Germain, and said : “ Maman, mignonne, please embrace the Governor of Champagne.” It appeared that the King had just told him that he was to receive this appointment, and if Mme de Sévigné was not quite bold enough to try and take him at his word—a task of some labour, for he had grown exceedingly stout—she, at any rate, expressed her joy at his good fortune in the warmest terms. Despite his bulk, Vivonne proved himself a capable soldier, serving with credit in Italy, and reaching the supreme dignity of Maréchal of France at the age of 39, on the same day as Ninon’s amorously ungallant friend, the Duc de Navailles.

Not all Ninon’s admirers were as fortunate in love and life as Vivonne. M. de Vendôme, a relative of Voltaire’s future patron, and like him a Grand-Prior of the Knights of Malta, wooed long and eagerly, but in vain. His failure was mortifying, and he, at length, felt disposed to repay it by affecting a weariness of pursuit. Accordingly, instead of the usual love-letter, thick with despair, he slipped into Ninon’s hands a tiny note, containing only the four following lines :—

*Indigne de mes feux, indigne de mes larmes,
Je renonce sans peine à tes foibles appas ;
Mon amour te prêtoit des charmes,
Ingrate, que tu n’avois pas.*

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Possibly M. de Vendôme expected that Ninon would be moved by vanity to show some kindness to her recalcitrant lover in the hope of charming him back. If that failed, she might still betray in anger the sting of his contempt. The fact disappointed both expectations, and speedily. After a few hours, M. de Vendôme received the sole guerdon of his boldness in four lines from Ninon's pen, lightly parodying his own effusion. They ran as follows :—

*Insensible à tes feux, insensible à tes larmes,
Je te vois renoncer à mes foibles appas ;
Mais, si l'amour prête des charmes,
Pourquoi n'en empruntois-tu pas ?*

Ninon did not stop to explain how M. de Vendôme was to set about borrowing from his own love ; but if her jest was not as deep as a well, it served for a moment's laughter. Vendôme had the temper to join in the laugh, and to remain on perfectly good terms with his cruel but entertaining mistress.

Others with less excuse for desertion were less faithful. The Comte de Tallard, busy, short-sighted, confident, was often to be seen in the Rue de Tournelles, a welcome guest and one who did not leave his friends in much doubt as to the satisfactory nature of his relations with their hostess. The years brought ambition, if not discretion. Tallard's visits grew more and more rare, to cease altogether when he was once embarked on the full tide of business and honours

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that was to carry him to Blenheim and a compulsory residence in foggy England. Ninon, who was not apt to excite herself about political disasters, may have smiled when she heard of the damp and inglorious end of so much activity.

Older men than the Comte de Tallard were as welcome as he in the Rue des Tournelles, though not always in quite the same way. Ninon could appreciate the high character and abilities of the Marquis de Pomponne, nephew of Antoine Arnauld, the famous philosopher and Jansenist theologian, and, naturally, himself suspected, or more than suspected of Jansenism. If she did not hope for a lover she was glad to acquire a friend in the man who won the full esteem of such different judges as Saint-Simon and Mme de Sévigné. One whom the latter entrusted with her dangerous comments on the trial of Fouquet and whom she continued to admire both as a private friend and as a public servant who bore with constant dignity the vicissitudes of fate. For the Marquis de Pomponne experienced by turns the satisfaction of high office, the pain of an unjust obscurity, and the test of a reinstatement that allowed Louis XIV to do some justice to a man who had had his secret regard even while he did not venture to accord him recognition. To Ninon a strong character, tact, subtlety, candour, and fine manners were of greater consequence than differences of opinion.

On occasion, there was also to be seen in the Rue



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des Tournelles the stately figure of Constantine Huyghens, Lord of Zuylichem, orator, diplomat, and amateur of music, who, despite his sixty-four years, numerous family, and official eminence, found the charms of the finest lute-player in Paris more than he could attempt to withstand. From music it was not difficult to pass onwards, and to the elder Huyghens belong the verses, sometimes attributed to his son, the famous scientist, which commemorate with a rather Dutch matter-of-factness Ninon's various beauties, and of which it must be confessed that the point does not turn upon the delicacy of her ear or her fingers.

Music, however, proved the more enduring bond, and years later, Huyghens, then on a visit to England, warmly recommended his friend, Lady Killigrew, as fit, from her talents, to compare, if not to match, with even Ninon's musical skill and discernment. At the same time, he took the opportunity to submit to her judgment one of those little pieces of which he was the indefatigable composer. The England of Charles II was not implacably deaf to such titles to reputation as Ninon's, and the Lord of Zuylichem had long stood too high in the opinion of the world to fear either contradiction or reproof if he were inclined to pay tribute to the brilliance of her musical taste and execution or prone to enlarge upon the generous abundance of her other qualities. Ninon's fame crossed the Channel, though not by his efforts alone, and was destined to grow as steadily and to almost as

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great proportions on the one side of it as on the other.

Of all the arts, music affected Ninon the most intensely, and a musician must have been clumsy or careless had he found the road to her friendship barred. Lulli, the King's musician, and by birth a Florentine, was neither. The humbly-born, ugly, pushing Tuscan was an intimate, when not a rival, of Molière, and a true artist, who brought with him from his Italian home an unforced capacity for good manners and a pride which forbade him to grovel to his social superiors, however ready he may have been to amuse his royal master by antics in which there was as much of contempt for the dignity that is merely pompous as of care for his own interests. Avid of pleasure, Lulli would have thought that he had done himself much wrong if he had neglected his opportunities, nor was he scrupulous to conceal the fact that Ninon appreciated his merits and proved no less kind to him than to persons who might be supposed to be physically more attractive.

In sharp contrast to the exuberant Lulli was another artistic frequenter of the Rue des Tournelles, Mignard, the portrait painter, who employed his art to hand down Ninon's features to posterity, without catching more than a faint reflexion of the life that made their highest charm. A solemn, elderly man, the father of a family, he lamented one day to Ninon that her friend, his daughter, was grievously deficient

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in memory, and received the cheering reply : “ So much the better, then she will never quote.”

The fidelity of Ninon’s guests to their evenings in the Rue des Tournelles was great, but none were, at this time, so unalterably faithful as young M. Jerome Moreau, who was always among the earliest to arrive, if he were not found ready to greet the first-comers, and also the last to leave at night. His position was known to everyone. Cultivated, intellectual, endowed with ample means, he had, when still little more than a boy, fallen deeply in love with Ninon, and he soon claimed permission to contribute towards hospitalities which, though they were never extravagant, sometimes strained Ninon’s small resources. M. Moreau did not need to be told that such gifts could do nothing to further his suit, that if Ninon consented to take presents from him, as she had taken them in former days from M. Coulon and M. de Vassé, she would, none the less, scorn the idea that her kisses might be bought ; for these M. Moreau knew that he must depend entirely upon her fancy, that she would not bestow the reward of love where she had in her heart no more than respect or liking. M. Moreau deserved and received her friendship, but to the end of his short life he remained an unsatisfied lover.

M. Moreau’s misfortune was not unique, though few, if any, wooed so long, so earnestly, and yet in vain. In addition to Charleval, the Comte de Brancas was commonly supposed to have shared his fate, but

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such risks had no influence upon the number of Ninon's guests. Night after night young and old assembled in the Rue des Tournelles, and there were to be found at one time or another, the Duc de la Rochefoucauld, alone or accompanied by his most dearly loved son, the young Duc de Longueville, the Marquis de Dangeau, well known as an annalist of more discretion than charm, and respected, not to say feared, by his acquaintances by reason of his extraordinary skill as a card-player, Boileau, the famous satirist, and many others, including a constantly growing proportion of women. All were ready to sup, to talk, and to make love, and were willing for Ninon's sake to dispense with the card tables which they would have found waiting for them in most fashionable houses, but which their hostess of the Rue des Tournelles always prohibited with the same firmness as she set her face against the bad manners of excessive drinking.

From this throng a once familiar figure had for some years been absent. M. de Gourville had soon found himself deeply involved in the ramifications of Fouquet's trial. Strokes of business that the Surintendant would never have thought of reprobating in a friend were looked at with very different eyes by M. Colbert. Questions were asked, the law was invoked, and M. de Gourville thought it expedient to retire to the country, and, finally, to go abroad. Before doing so he had to arrange his affairs, and, in

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particular, to dispose of property amounting to some sixty thousand livres. It was not likely that his exile would be brief, and there were few people in Paris whom he was prepared to trust with the guardianship of so considerable a sum. It would, he thought, be best to divide the temptation and the risk between the two most honourable persons of his acquaintance.

The Grand-Penitentiary of Notre-Dame was renowned for austerity of life and scorn of worldly cares ; as a priest, he should have little occasion for expense, and must, if his character had not been flattered by report, have every motive for holding a trust sacred. M. de Gourville's mind was made up. He was a good Catholic as well as a man of the world, and the Grand-Penitentiary should take charge of thirty thousand livres under the solemn pledge to restore them to their owner whenever he was asked to do so. No difficulty was made on that or any other ground, and the affair was quickly settled to M. de Gourville's satisfaction. After this the destiny of the other thirty thousand livres seemed obvious. No one could well be more unlike a priest than Ninon, nevertheless, her reputation for honesty stood high. If good faith were not to be found in either of two such opposite persons it must have left the earth. Ninon, also, readily agreed to accept the charge, and next morning, M. de Gourville was able to set out on his long and dangerous journey to the frontier with a mind comparatively at ease.

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In one matter, at any rate, his judgment proved absolutely correct. It was several years before he could again venture to be seen in Paris. At length, he could bear the pain of continued exile no longer, and braving an uncertain future and the grave risks of legal fines or imprisonment, he made his way once more to the city of his dreams, if, that is to say, so practical a man can be supposed to have dreamed in any circumstances. His first thought was of the Grand-Penitentiary and the thirty thousand livres. A casual question disposed of one anxiety ; the Grand-Penitentiary was living and still a respected and familiar figure in the streets of Paris. With increased confidence M. de Gourville made his way towards Notre-Dame, and was presently ushered into the modest chamber of his trustee. There a disappointment awaited him. While admitting readily that if he had received such a deposit he would be bound to return it, the priest blandly denied all knowledge of M. de Gourville's property, and no efforts that the exasperated creditor could make sufficed to recall any part of the incident to his memory. At last M. de Gourville was forced to abandon the task as hopeless, and retired, inwardly cursing all seeming saints for their hypocrisy, and himself for his misplaced trustfulness. In all probability he had lost the whole sixty thousand livres ; for when a man like the Grand-Penitentiary had proved so unblushingly false what chance was there that a woman of Ninon's character

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would be found more faithful ? Fruitless as the quest must be, it would be still more vain to delay, so M. de Gourville turned with slow steps and a heavy heart towards the Rue des Tournelles.

Ninon welcomed her visitor with warm congratulations on his safe return, but did not fail at once to notice that he seemed both anxious and embarrassed. Surely he could not have imagined that she had lived disconsolate during his absence, nor expect a renewal of their former intimacy ? On this point Ninon's fears were quickly set at rest. M. de Gourville was not an elderly victim of love's young dream, and hastened to explain that he could not make his visit one of mere friendship, since he was, unfortunately, in urgent need of a considerable sum of money. No doubt she would be able to supply him ; for she could not but remember that he had left thirty thousand livres in her charge. To his intense and unconcealed joy not a hint of trouble appeared on Ninon's face, and turning to her desk, she brought out the casket containing his precious thirty thousand livres precisely in the state that he had last seen it. Explanations followed. M. de Gourville narrated the baseness of the Grand-Penitentiary, and, despite her protests that she had done nothing out of the common, overwhelmed Ninon with thanks. His joy and relief were sincere ; for no one knew better than he did that the highest birth and the finest manners were perfectly compatible with an extreme readiness to spend money

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without inquiring where it came from, and to keep it without the least regard to any claims of its lawful owner.

The story—which some French scholars who should have known better have supposed to be due to the imagination of Voltaire—spread far and wide. Saint-Evremond was, naturally, delighted that the friend whom he had always honoured should have proved her quality to the world, and did not soon grow weary of complimenting her upon the fact. Unwittingly, Ninon had crowned her labours. Here was a virtue that the dullest and most prejudiced could not fail to see, made doubly striking by contrast. Wit and tact might be scorned, the subtleties of good influence might escape general observation, but plain honesty, where there was neither special obligation nor any risk of legal punishment, came home to every mind, and the story of M. de Gourville's casket did, perhaps, as much to make Ninon's position unassailable as the many and obvious benefits that the young nobles of France were deriving from their constant visits to the Rue des Tournelles.

XI

CHARLES DE SÉVIGNÉ

ON the morning of the 6th of March, in the year 1671, Ninon was sitting alone in the quiet little book-room of her house in the Rue des Tournelles, glancing with a careless eye at the pages of a newly-purchased folio. At most times she would have been attentive, but now she felt more inclined to thought than to reading. Life, however enjoyable it might still be, brought changes, and she acknowledged sadly to herself that she was no longer a young woman. It was a distant day since she had first written to Saint-Evremond to lament the passing of her youth and received a pleasantly sceptical answer. He could continue to appeal to the reports that reached him from Paris in proof that love and laughter showed no signs of deserting the Rue des Tournelles, but Ninon was conscious of a difference too subtle even for Saint-Evremond to grasp. Without any obvious alteration the balance was slowly shifting, and Ninon could not hope that these things would long maintain their old, unquestioned pre-eminence in her life. She must change with the changing facts, and her heart revolted from the necessity.

This change played a little part in the only misunderstanding that ever cast the faintest shadow upon

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Ninon's friendship with Saint-Evremond. It began with the best intentions on both sides. Before his exile Saint-Evremond had lent two thousand three hundred livres to M. d'Elbène, chamberlain to Gaston d'Orléans, a charming fellow, an early, constant, and intimate friend of Ninon, but notorious as one of the readiest borrowers and the most unwilling payers in France. D'Elbène, treating Saint-Evremond on his usual plan, remained contentedly his debtor, all the more so as the affair was not recalled to his mind with tactless frequency. At length, however, Saint-Evremond's patience began to wear thin. He had lost his own fortune, he had tried to live in England, where he could look for some help, and had been driven back to Holland by ill-health, and, finally, he heard that D'Elbène was about to marry. Concluding that a man who could afford to marry could also afford to pay his debts, he wrote in that sense to his friend M. d'Hervart, a Parisian lawyer. The step was not fruitless. D'Elbène, indeed, was fertile only in excuses, but Ninon pledged herself to pay a thousand livres of the debt as soon as she should herself have received certain dues that were owing to her. So far so good. Saint-Evremond felt as sure of this portion of the money as if it had been already in his own pocket.

But the months went by, and nothing happened, though Saint-Evremond twice wrote anxiously and insistently to M. d'Hervart. At last there came an answer. M. d'Hervart informed him that he could

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draw on Ninon at once for five hundred livres, and that she also had written to tell him this, and to promise to pay the whole balance at her leisure. Saint-Evremond was bitterly disappointed. Even Ninon was forgetting him, paying only five hundred instead of a thousand, and apparently excusing herself by some vague pledge to pay all the rest at a future time ; for her own letter never reached him. He sat down and wrote sarcastically reminding her that she was as notoriously changeable to her lovers as faithful to her friends, and ironically congratulating her on the discrimination with which she was treating him in his true character, as something between a lover and a friend ; though, he confessed, that in this case he would have preferred to have been treated altogether as a friend. But notwithstanding his irony Saint-Evremond still had enough confidence in her to accept her promise of an eventual complete settlement on the understanding that d'Elbène was not to be troubled any further.

Saint-Evremond's sarcasms gave deeper offence than he expected. M. d'Hervart wrote that Ninon was seriously annoyed, and Saint-Evremond felt constrained to apologize and try to pass the whole matter off as a joke. His apologies had scarcely left his hands, when a letter from Ninon herself arrived. It ran as follows : " Too high a sense of honour always tends a little towards harshness, and it is rare for the virtues to be maintained in their right

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proportions. I had written you a very fine letter, in which I made clear the full extent of my virtue in settling my debt before it was due. Although I had given my word, I don't think that Marcus Aurelius, a philosopher, and an Emperor to boot, paid his creditors in advance.

"However, this is what I have now done for you and poor d'Elbène. Equitably I should have put myself in your place and waited until my own business—from which I have not got a halfpenny yet—was settled ; but I thought that you were both more to be pitied than I, and I have sent you a thousand livres, though, as I have said, the thousand was not due until the close of the account.

"That gives me confidence, perhaps a little too much so, in myself, but when you have thought it over, you will see that you ought not to have twitted a banker without reproach.

"The cold, a bad pen, and the fact that I am keeping a man of M. d'Hervart's waiting, prevent me from saying more ; love me enough to get over my severity.

"I told you that my charms had been changed into solid and serious qualities, and, you know, it is not allowable to joke with a personage."

Presently Saint-Evremond returned to England but the matter was not yet quite settled. M. d'Hervart wrote that now d'Elbène seemed willing to pay if Saint-Evremond would press him. At once Saint-

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Evremond's Norman caution awoke. Ninon's promise to pay was on condition that d'Elbène was left alone, and she would be perfectly justified in washing her hands of the whole affair if he were now pressed for payment. A promise from Ninon was too valuable a security to play tricks with, and Saint-Evremond wrote in hot haste that he did not want to be paid, that he was obstinate in his views and hoped that he would get his own way in this, and that M. d'Hervart was to tell d'Elbène not to trouble himself in the very least about the debt. In all probability Ninon finally bore the whole burden, though it was rather a heavy one for her limited means.

All this had happened more than a year ago, but Ninon was not yet grown so solemn a personage as to forget how to make love. That very afternoon young Charles de Sévigné was going to take her to a concert given by Mlle Raymond, at which the famous trio, d'Ytier and the two Camus were to perform ; and Ninon knew from experience the effect of music on a sensitive temperament. Ninon's acquaintance with the Sévigné family was full twenty years old, but it was only of late that she had begun to suppose that it might once more prove intimate. The Marquis de Sévigné and M. de Vassé had been keen rivals for her good graces, and it was, in fact, at a supper at M. de Vassé's that he learnt that victory had gone for the moment to Sévigné. Ninon had enjoyed his discomforture rather mercilessly, but Vassé, if a fop,

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was good-natured, and, instead of quarrelling with his unkind mistress, continued to pay a part of her expenses ; a light burden which Sévigné, who sacrificed to Ninon's material prosperity nothing beyond a ring of small value that she afterwards lost, neither desired nor was expected to share. The accustomed obligations of a reigning favourite were of a different kind, and Sévigné met them to his own and, as he at any rate believed, to Ninon's complete satisfaction. Owing to his Breton blood the hatred of all superiority natural to the meaner type of Celt he was so little careful to hide his good fortune from his wife that, chancing next day to be in the company of her cousin Bussy-Rabutin, he made him the confidant of his joys, a frankness that Bussy rewarded by hurrying off to inform Mme de Sévigné of all the details of the matter, in the hope of turning her justifiable annoyance to his own profit.

Mme de Sévigné heard the tale with distress and anger ; for, not having ceased to love her husband, she was hurt by his neglect, and, even more, by the insulting publicity that he had given to it. Being, however, a Frenchwoman, she remained cool enough to penetrate Bussy's motive and to frustrate his hopes by the remark that she was, perhaps, not as angry as he supposed. With Sévigné himself she was less patient, but she knew her world too well to expect faithfulness from husbands, and was, in truth, fully alive to the humorous element in such affairs. Ninon's

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responsibility for Mme de Sévigné's unhappiness proved slight and brief. At the end of three months she had tired of Sévigné and he was equally prepared for a change. Rambouillet took his place, in due time Vassé achieved his ambition, and less than a year later, Sévigné fell in a duel about another woman, leaving his widow with the daughter who was the object of her lifelong worship and a son whose love she repaid, not grudgingly, but without extravagance.

Charles de Sévigné was now twenty-three years of age, with little knowledge of the world save what he had acquired by joining his friend the young Duc de Longueville in an expedition to Candia, from which they had not very long returned in no good humour at the way in which the French Government had appreciated their services. He had been hardly a month in Paris, its delights were new to him, and their effect was all the greater from having been postponed. A Breton, not only by birth but by inclination, his warm Celtic fancy gave to every transient happening a glamorous, indefinite halo that only began to fade when some fresh experience caught the attention of his agile mind. The beauty of women, the charm of the arts, the magnificence of the most splendid court and the most civilized capital in the world made an enchanting sequence that filled each day with confused rapture. He saw himself a noble and brilliant young man in the most brilliant environment that the fates had it in their power to supply.

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Glamour needed passion if it were to survive, and an introduction to Ninon was a simple matter for the close friend of the Duc de la Rochefoucauld's favourite son. Charles de Sévigné came prepared. Love was the sweetest thing in life, the crown of manhood, the chief of masculine graces ; most readily would he have believed himself the man to die of a passion. Would Ninon add to wit and beauty the charm of appreciation ? She was critical, almost fastidious, and he dared do no more than cherish hopes, which, however, involuntarily took form as visions of a personal triumph. Too often such visions wavered and dissolved in the presence of fact, but these grew hourly brighter and more definite. The handsome, intelligent young man with the dreamy eyes that never lost their glint of humour seemed to Ninon one of those rare striplings who could understand her thoughts, share her tastes, and also, touch her heart ; the last all the more surely because he had in him something of the softness and dependence of a child.

Charles de Sévigné left the Rue des Tournelles with the happy consciousness that he was in a fair way to become involved in all the troubles of love. He welcomed them with open arms. Could anything be so delicious as to fall in love with Ninon and find her ready to return his passion ? Her native charms would alone have sufficed, but their power was multiplied indefinitely by her fame and by the known critical discernment in the choice of intimates that

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gave to her tenderness a meaning delightful to a young man lately entered upon the world. To be Ninon's lover was so much more than a charming folly that it might rank as an object of ambition, if not a just ground for self-esteem. And beyond all this was the contrast between her serene strength and his own restless activities. Her mind seemed to his like the swift-flowing pellucid river by the side of the brook with its thousand turbulent eddies lashed into opaque foam by their own brief violence ; if that strong current was ever troubled in its depths, these lay out of the reach of Sévigné's unpractised eyes.

The concert at Mlle Raymond's completed his enchantment. Charles de Sévigné loved the arts, and to watch Ninon's delight in exquisite harmonies, her swift appraisal of each beauty and each fault, while they mutually betrayed in delicious half-restraint of look and gesture their heightened emotion inextricably compact of beauty and desire, was to him a blissful experience of life's best gifts.

The glorious secret must be shared without the loss of a moment. A few minutes after leaving Mlle Raymond's he was sitting down to write proudly to his sister : " I have just been to a charming symphony given by the two Camus and d'Ytier, and think what company I was in, Mlle de Lenclos, Mme de La Sablière, Mme de Salins. . . . If, after that, you don't think me a fine fellow, you are wrong ; for you did not see the black perruque that made me look frightful.

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But to-morrow I shall have another that will reassure them and show them that I am a man of fashion." If the Comtesse de Grignan did not immediately guess, she was not long in learning that "them" meant Ninon, and perhaps she wondered at her brother's enthusiasm. Her own heart could teach her little or nothing of love.

Mme de Sévigné was more gravely concerned. Not for twenty-four hours did Charles leave her in ignorance that he had come under the "laws of Ninon", and though these laws might be good for other young men, Mme de Sévigné held that they had spoiled her husband and would spoil her son. The former belief was, beyond doubt, an amiable illusion—*feu* M. de Sévigné had possessed no qualities that Ninon could spoil. As for Charles she might make or mar him, or, possibly, the deep-rooted instincts of a Celt would remain untouched by her classic lucidity of thought and feeling.

Mme de Sévigné did not pause to weigh these possibilities. She loved her son, and he loved her with a steady warmth that was proof against jealousy and even against substantial injuries arising from her partiality in any business where Mme de Grignan was concerned. Mme de Sévigné knew that he valued her opinion, and she had no scruple in bringing her influence to bear at once, more especially when the course of a few days revealed the full extent of Ninon's wickedness. Charles, unalterably affectionate and

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unalterably ingenuous, related daily to his mother all his experiences and emotions, down to the most surprising details. If these had been concerned only with kisses and their results, Mme de Sévigné would have heard his lengthy narratives with greater patience, but it soon appeared that Ninon was adding words to deeds and speaking of the Catholic Church with anything but a proper faith in its dogmas. To make a lover of Charles was one thing, to try to make him a heretic was quite another, and much more serious.

Accordingly, Mme de Sévigné used all her strength to wean Charles from his infatuation, enlisted her friend Mme de La Fayette in the cause, and soon began to hope that they were making progress. The struggle, though sharp, was not bitter. Every phase was, naturally, reported to Mme de Grignan, and while the issue was still altogether doubtful, Mme de Sévigné could give precedence to a brief comment of Ninon's touching the effect of the latest fashions upon the personal appearance of Mme de Choiseul, and have the taste to find it excellent. That Ninon should have also warmly defended Mme de Grignan's claim to possess all the wit of the family was, in Mme de Sévigné's eyes, still better evidence of a rightness of judgment too uncommon where her beautiful, but by no means universally popular daughter was concerned. Ninon, who had in mind the interest in the philosophy of Descartes that made Mme de Grignan unique among the Sévignés, spoke with her usual strict

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regard for truth, but she must have been well aware of one effect that she would produce : Mme de Sévigné might safely be trusted to pardon the most startling improprieties in so gallant a defender of the Comtesse de Grignan's perfection.

On every other topic Mme de Sévigné was quite ready to take wit as a substitute for compliment. Ninon had required no long intimacy with Charles de Sévigné to learn that in several ways he fell painfully short of being her ideal lover, and she presently summed up her researches into his character in the phrase " that he was a pumpkin hashed in snow ". From some lips this verdict might have sounded impolite, but Sévigné neither blamed his critical mistress, nor failed dutifully to report her opinion to his mother, who, recognizing that Ninon had overlooked nothing of present importance, joyfully included it in three or four successive letters to Grignan.

A fight conducted in such a spirit could not leave festering wounds, but it might have been much more prolonged if Ninon had cared to wage it earnestly. Half-tired of the sport, half-suspecting that another influence besides Mme de Sévigné's was being used against her, she informed her lover, as tactfully as possible, that cold pumpkin was not the food for love. To a truth so obvious Charles had no reply, but if previously he had been distracted he was now in despair, and willing to do anything to placate his mistress. Without encouraging any hopes on

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this point Ninon turned his mood to her own purposes.

The career of Mlle Champmeslé, on and in the neighbourhood of the Parisian stage, had begun with the triumphs that her youth, beauty, and talents deserved, nor had Charles de Sévigné shown himself among the slowest to acclaim her merits. To his volatile mind an absorbing passion for two women, if not precisely at the same time, at least at different hours on the same day, had presented no difficulty. But Ninon, oddly enough, seemed angry. She had got back her own love-letters, and she now asked him to give her those of Mlle Champmeslé, avowing that she meant to send them to the actress's protector and make her smart for her kindness to Sévigné. For the moment Ninon had thrown over her principles ; for the first and last time in her life she was yielding to jealousy and desirous to injure a rival. The matter went deeper than Charles de Sévigné could have guessed. In an equal fight Ninon feared no woman and could bear the loss of a lover unresentfully, but one weapon was dropping from her hand that Mlle Champmeslé could still wield with effect. Charles de Sévigné had answered the call of youth to youth, and the recognition that that was a call she could no longer use stung Ninon to madness ; for if the truth itself were not new, it felt very different when made visible in the mocking freshness of Mlle Champmeslé's beauty.

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Charles de Sévigné, astonished, nervous, a little regretting his inconstancy, forgot Mlle Champmeslé's feelings, forgot that Ninon neither was nor intended again to become his mistress, forgot, in short, everything except that she had set her heart on a boon which it was in his power to grant, and surrendered without conditions or protests, her rival's love-letters. Fortunately, however, he did not neglect to give Mme de Sévigné his usual full account of his behaviour. She was horrified, explained that he had been guilty of a breach of honour that might be reckoned unpardonable, and insisted that he must at once go back to Ninon and recover Mlle Champmeslé's letters at any cost.

As little able to dispute the justice of his mother's criticism as he had been to dispute that of Ninon's, Charles de Sévigné obediently hurried off to the Rue des Tournelles. Ninon welcomed him warmly enough until he revealed his object. She would hardly condescend to discussion. The letters were now hers, and she meant to do what she liked with them. To bend Ninon's will was no easy task, but Sévigné did not flinch. He argued, entreated, stormed, and at last, Ninon, who was beginning to see that she was wrong, allowed him, with a little friendly violence, to snatch the bundle of letters from her. He did not wait to refine upon his victory. He would not feel happy until the whole bundle was safe in his mother's keeping. Mme de Sévigné received it with heartfelt relief, and to guard

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against any risk of further accidents had every letter carefully burned.

As regards love-making between Ninon and Charles, Mme de Sévigné had definitely triumphed, but if she imagined that the affair of the letters would necessarily lead to a more or less complete breach she was deceiving herself. Ninon very quickly overcame her fit of temper, while Charles, on resigning himself to the position of a friend, discovered that it was so far from unpleasant that he visited Ninon constantly, and, as a rule, contrived to spend a very creditable portion of each day in her company. Society was quite accustomed to seeing them together. On one occasion Ninon, followed closely by Charles, happened to enter a room where five or six other young men of their acquaintance had already assembled. No one condescended to anything so obvious as a wink, much less a whisper, but significant glances were exchanged—it would have been stupid not to recognize the symptoms of a reigning favourite. Ninon was at no loss to interpret these glances and at once broke out laughingly : “ You damn yourselves by malice if you think that there is anything wrong between us. I assure you we are like brother and sister ”—“ a true pumpkin,” added Mme de Sévigné cheerfully in recounting the incident to her daughter.

Nevertheless, she was determined to get Charles away from such dangerously unorthodox society, and presently succeeded in persuading him to go down with

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her to his estate in Brittany. Circumstances soon came to her aid. War with Holland was threatening, and at the beginning of July, Charles de Sévigné, whose mother had bought him an ensigncy in the company of his cousin La Trousse, left Brittany to join his regiment. Active service occupied the next months of his life, and though he grew heartily tired of soldiering, he yet led his men with such bravery as, on one occasion, to earn the special notice of Maréchal de Luxembourg.

Love-affairs, more odd than creditable, diversified existence, but his heart was not in them any more than in courts or camps, not being as his friend the Duc de la Rochefoucauld remarked, "the stuff out of which great passions are made." A true Celt, he began to feel the desire to live in his own land and among his own people. In spite of all remonstrances, he determined to sell his commission in order to settle down to the life of a Breton country gentleman, and so eager was he, that only enforced absence from Paris prevented him from destroying its market-value by the frankness with which he set forth the evils of a soldier's career. He had his will, and, after another passing love-affair, married the devout and delicate daughter of a neighbour.

Always a sincere Catholic, Charles de Sévigné became increasingly religious when marriage had tamed his fancy, hostile influences were removed, and age had given time for his natural instincts to assert themselves. In the end piety overcame the attractions

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of country life and local politics, more especially as in these last he was not very successful. Brittany grew to seem of less consequence than the welfare of his soul, which, he thought, would be best served by a semi-monastic life in Paris. It had never been easy to turn Charles de Sévigné from a plan that he had taken into his head until he had rubbed off some of the glamour by putting it to the test of experience, and in the present case there was no one to object. His wife shared his views and aspirations. They were childless, and she felt quite willing to leave Brittany for a Parisian convent. Mme de Sévigné was dead, and though Ninon still lived this did not make Paris dangerous ; for her charms and her daring had long faded from the memory of the pious, domesticated, and somewhat valetudinarian Marquis de Sévigné. If she remembered she had become indifferent, and no attempt was made on either side to renew their former acquaintance.

Ninon's connexion with the Sévigné's did not, however, come to an end when Charles accompanied his mother to Brittany. They had many friends in common. In addition to Pomponne and the Duc de Vivonne, Gourville and Mme Scarron must be reckoned among the number. Time brought others. Hardly had Charles left Paris, when young M. de Longueville was asking Ninon to deliver him from the clutches of the stout Mme de Castelnau—the cushion-like beauty whom Mme de Grignan feared

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that Mme de Sévigné wished her to resemble. War and a speedy death on the battle-field gave M. de Longueville little chance of discovering whether Ninon had lost in wit or fascination since the days of his uncle, the Prince de Condé.

The day when Ninon would cease, in one capacity or another, to attract young men was not close, if, indeed, she can be said ever to have reached it. Towards the end of the year in which Charles de Sévigné and M. de Longueville had sought her favours an heir was born to the Marquis de Grignan and welcomed with the usual rejoicings by his parents and his grandmother. The inheritor of a proud and ancient name must not be suffered to live in obscurity, or to become the victim of a rustic shyness that would unfit him to take his due place in the world. At the age of fourteen, accordingly, there came a visit to Versailles in order to be presented to the King, who, despite the small stature and inconspicuous ways of the young Marquis, noticed him favourably and kept him about the Court.

Military service followed a few years later, and the timid boy proved himself a brave and energetic soldier. A slight wound at the siege of Mannheim was enough to turn him into a family hero. He got leave to go to Paris, and now felt himself so much a man and a soldier that even his nearest relations hardly dared to give him any advice. Mme de Sévigné was at the Hotel Carnavalet, and eager to introduce

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her grandson to the best society, which for its part was quite ready to welcome him. An invitation from Mme de Castelnau was made attractive by her possession of a young and pretty daughter—the one with a squint the Marquis resigned to his friend Sanzei—as well as by the presence of other guests. “He had taken his hautbois,” his grandmother writes to Mme de Grignan, “and they danced until midnight. He is very pleased with the house-party, finding there Saint-Herem, Jeannin, Choiseul, Ninon ; he is in familiar country.” It must be observed that three of the four names are masculine.

Ninon’s social prestige had grown with the years, and an acquaintance that had been, in Mme de Sévigné’s eyes, a danger to Charles was more like an honour for the young Marquis de Grignan. Of course, nothing in all this need imply that Ninon had either the opportunity or the desire to continue the education of the family to the third generation.

If Mme de Sévigné herself never became a frequent visitor at the Rue des Tournelles, her cousins and lifelong friends, M. and Mme de Coulanges, were less reserved, and were able from time to time to give her information as to Ninon’s welfare. To Mme de Coulanges the interesting point was that women now ran after Mlle de Lenclos as much as other people did formerly ; on which Mme de Sévigné characteristically comments that from all accounts the men have not grown less faithful, but that if Ninon had now

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seen only the women she would have no reason to complain, having had the men at the age for favours. M. de Coulanges was more concerned with Ninon's health and writes that : " Our dear Lenclos has a cold which I do not like at all ; one sees nothing but colds everywhere."

To Ninon the Sévigné's and their friends were hardly in the centre of the picture. Even Charles was not much more than a passing fancy. In himself he counted for little, but it did not seem that she would have been able to hold him long or securely, even if she had wished to do so, and the incident brought home to her that the time was coming when Ninon must give up the first place to Mlle de Lenclos, perhaps a more distinguished woman, but beyond doubt a less completely happy one. Nothing more than the common, one might say, inevitable human fate, but Ninon's was not of the order of mind that can believe that two, or even an indefinite number of blacks make a white.

XII

M. DE LA BOISSIÈRE

EVEN before the date of her intimacy with Charles de Sévigné Ninon was beginning to discover that a new interest, and one that was likely to grow more important with passage of the years, had come into her life. Unlike her other children, François-Louis de Mornay had escaped the perils of infancy, and, despite the change in their relations, his future was a matter of tender concern to both his parents. In accordance with the ideas of the time, control and responsibility belonged almost exclusively to his father. M. de Villarceaux accepted the burden willingly enough, and made no painful distinction between the little François-Louis and his legitimate half-brothers. When he had been taught the accomplishments proper to his rank two points remained to be settled, the choice, firstly, of a title, and, secondly, of a career. Neither choice presented much difficulty. From one of his father's estates, François-Louis took the title of M. de la Boissière, in his youth by courtesy, but afterwards by legal right.

His birth also had an influence in determining his career. Custom had assigned to the Normans, together with the inhabitants of Provence and Brittany, the privilege of supplying officers to the French navy,

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and a naval life has always made a strong appeal to the imagination of active youths. In La Boissière's boyhood it chanced that this attraction was peculiarly strong. Colbert and others were then hoping that the French navy would one day become as supreme at sea as the French army already was on land. To enter a service that was daily rising in the public estimation with the certainty of meeting there many companions from his own province was too powerful a motive to be resisted, and La Boissière found himself in due time an officer at Toulon.

A life that requires implicit obedience to orders could not, however, have proved entirely to the taste of the son of M. de Villarceaux and Ninon ; for his mother, at any rate, was singularly little accustomed to obeying any will but her own. Nor did La Boissière in fact so belie his parentage as to pass untroubled through the years of subordination. He had not been very long a naval officer before he incurred by some unknown freak such grave disapproval that he was dismissed the service. It seemed a shattering blow. He was still young, but the number of careers then open to a Frenchman of gentle birth was very small, and La Boissière may well have thought that the future held nothing but a dishonoured idleness. It is significant that in such a crisis he turned to his mother for help. She did not fail him. Without wasting time on regret, she acted, and to the purpose. Less than three weeks after he

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had been cashiered her son was back at Toulon in his former rank.

In truth Ninon's luck deserved to become proverbial. The friend most useful to her was always at hand. Candale and Mortemar had known the foibles of the Bailiff of Saint-Germain and thus made the dangerous hostility of M. Jacques Olier of no effect, Queen Christina had fallen a victim to her powers of fascination just at the moment when she could do her an invaluable service beyond the strength of any other friend, M. de Gourville had become her lover when Saint-Evremond was in desperate need of energetic and adroit assistance, and had, afterwards, furnished her, as if by design, with precisely the contrast that would best establish her moral character, and now, when La Boissière was threatened with ruin, she could count among her most recent friends a man nearly all-powerful in the French Navy.

François d'Usson, Marquis de Bonrepaux, can never have hoped to attract any woman on physical grounds ; for he was plain of face, exceedingly short and squat in figure, and had an ill-sounding voice. Nor could he boast hereditary advantages of fortune. His birth was of the kind that Saint-Simon hardly deigned to notice, and his ancestral estate was small. Nevertheless he prospered greatly and amid general goodwill. Beginning life as a clerk in the department of the marine, he accumulated much wealth in an entirely honourable fashion and gradually drew into

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his hands some of the most important threads of the naval service. It was at this stage in his career that he became acquainted with Ninon. His practical ability, good-sense, uprightness, and warmth of heart would alone have been enough to win her respect even had he not possessed a decided taste for literature, which found expression in a capacity for letters so unusual as to lead Racine to compare him to Cicero in his power both of writing to the purpose on serious affairs and jesting agreeably about trifles. To him Ninon turned in her difficulty, and, as we have seen, with the happiest results.

Such a service rendered by such a man was more than sufficient to make Ninon his friend for life. Their intimacy was only chequered by the numerous and prolonged absences from Paris that the public service imposed upon M. de Bonrepaux. Some of these, being concerned with naval affairs at the various ports, had the compensating advantage of allowing him to show that he was as ready to serve Ninon and La Boissière in small matters as in great. The pay of a French naval officer was respectable, and in La Boissière's case it was probably eked out by some assistance from his father, but it was not always sufficient for the young man's needs and on these occasions he was in the habit of appealing to his mother. She responded promptly and sometimes took the precaution of asking M. de Bonrepaux to see that her gifts reached their destination.

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Ninon's letters on the subject are tantalizingly brief, but to judge from the following example, it would seem that her son's need of money could be urgent enough to make her feel that even in such matters M. de Bonrepaux's services were more than trifling. At an unknown date she writes : "Forgive me for overwhelming you with requests. I beseech you to give the fifty écus that are in this packet to La Boissière. On top of that I think a message of politeness would strike you as absurd. You see how I make use of you, and whether, after what I have said, I think of you as a friend or not."

Stimulated by these and like good offices, Ninon's friendship with M. de Bonrepaux grew steadily and developed into a warm liking that was fully returned. Circumstances, however, were not always favourable to close intimacy. M. de Bonrepaux was one of those obliging and thoroughly competent men upon whose willing shoulders heavy burdens are apt to be laid. In particular, his knowledge of commerce, naval administration, and diplomacy recommended him to Louis XIV as a fit man for an important special mission to London, of a nature partly commercial, but in the main diplomatic.

The times were critical. James II, who had not yet lost all his popularity, was growing resentful of his dependence on Louis XIV, and it was known that he would receive every encouragement both from Spain and from the Papacy should he be inclined to

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make such terms with his new Parliament as would enable him to gratify his pride and patriotism. The delicate task of soothing his resentment, stimulating his Catholic zeal, and discreetly finding opportunity to widen the gulf between him and his people was thought to demand more capacity and energy than was possessed by M. Barillon, the French ambassador. On the other hand, M. de Bonrepaux could not only supply these defects, but by his knowledge of maritime affairs was peculiarly fitted both to win the regard of James II, and to gather useful information about the state of the English navy. Louis XIV had not judged amiss. M. de Bonrepaux played his part so well during his two years' residence in London that henceforth diplomacy was destined to become his chief occupation. To Ninon this was a misfortune. From England M. de Bonrepaux could at least give her news of Saint-Evremond, but when his official duties took him to Denmark, and then to Holland, he could no longer hope to keep in close touch with his Parisian acquaintances nor to find the same abundant occasions for doing them service. The gout eventually provided him with an excuse for retirement, but by that time Ninon had become to her friends only a gracious memory.

Before turning to diplomacy, M. de Bonrepaux had been able to make sure that La Boissière's career in the navy should not be affected by any consciousness on the part of his superior officers that their judgment

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had been overruled. Only a few years after his return to Toulon the young midshipman was promoted to the rank of lieutenant and transferred to Brest, where the admiral chanced to be an old friend of his mother's. If, however, he had any hopes of seeing active service against the Dutch they must have been disappointed by the conclusion of the Peace of Nymwegen. In the circumstances he probably welcomed his return to Toulon as captain of a frigate ; for even in times of peace the Algerian corsairs might be obliging enough to furnish a young French captain with occupation, while nothing informal was to be expected of the Dutch.

Very possibly La Boissière took part in the expedition against Genoa, and either there or elsewhere he received a wound in the foot severe enough to require a prolonged period of convalescence. He left Toulon, and spent at least a month with his mother, and even then was so far from recovery that he was not only quite unable to carry out his professed intention of making the short journey to Versailles in order to pay his respects to M. de Bonrepaux, but was in such agonies of pain that he felt unable even to write a letter of thanks to his patron, and left his mother to explain the cause of his apparent lack of gratitude. Whether La Boissière's wound was apt to become peculiarly troublesome when tedious social duties were urgent neither Ninon nor anyone else has told us.

In any case La Boissière was able, after a time, to

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return to duty at Toulon and may again have seen service ; for among the reasons which moved Louis XIV to grant his father's application to declare him legitimate the two chief were, that he had been brought up in the Catholic, Apostolic, and Roman religion, and that he had given proofs of courage and devotion in the royal service such as to entitle him to the rank which he then enjoyed of captain of a battleship.

At the date of his legitimation La Boissière could not have been more than thirty-eight years of age, but, nevertheless, he had already reached the highest point of his professional career. Possibly he lost interest in his naval duties as he grew older, for there is no doubt that his strongest passion was the love of music which he had by right of inheritance from his mother and grandfather. Himself a skilful performer, he would allow no person of musical talent to pass through Toulon on their way to or from Italy without partaking of his hospitality and giving him in return the pleasure of a musical evening.

In the course of public affairs he may also have found an excuse, and, in truth a reason, for some neglect of his profession. The hopes of his youth were not destined to fulfilment. If the victory of Beachy Head seemed to have made France mistress of the sea, it only flattered to deceive, and Lord Russell's victory at La Hogue proved the beginning of a long period during which the supremacy of

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England grew more and more incontestable. French resources were great, but they had been over-strained, and the French navy was one of the first departments of state to feel the effect. In the War of the Spanish Succession it added little or nothing to its laurels, and the years of peace that followed were in naval matters not used to advantage.

La Boissière lived on at Toulon without either abandoning the navy or achieving further distinction. The death of the Marquis de Villarceaux in 1697 probably made some advantageous change in his circumstances, for in the next year he married a girl of good family from Martinique. He long survived both parents, dying in 1730 at about the age of 78. It does not appear that he left any children.

If Ninon herself had other children who lived beyond infancy no trace of them has been discovered, and there seems every reason to believe that the common tendency of stock which has produced a genius to become sterile was verified in her case.

XIII

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AT no time in her life was Ninon's social position ambiguous. Born into a family of unquestionable, if modest, rank, she was quite free from that galling consciousness of a native taint that often led her contemporaries of humbler origin to betray themselves by loud self-assertion or misplaced deference. A childhood spent among her equals, without either present luxuries or hopes of future wealth, confirmed belief in a rational security ; the world was to be trusted up to a certain point, beyond lay idle fears and dreams. No experience of slights or patronage, of harsh restriction, or untaught blundering came to disturb this happy confidence. The pretty, witty, well-mannered child was an unspoiled pet. The young girl felt everywhere at ease ; finding company homelike, since home was no wise different from society, nor less strict in its claims upon her forbearance. Wider knowledge could bring to light no unsuspected divergence of outlook or standards. Life in a larger and more splendid setting than that to which she had been always accustomed Ninon was destined often to find, but even if fate had chanced to lead her, like Mme de Maintenon, to the steps of a throne, she would still have met with nothing to

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make her feel a stranger ; the atmosphere of her natural world was one with that of the most exclusive society.

These early impressions were never lost, and they gave to Ninon, amid her wildest vagaries, a serenity that divided her beyond all hope of mistake from the social climbers, and formed an essential condition of her triumphs. This, however, did not mean that Ninon lived free from social hostility or threats of social ostracism. She knew what the world held her to be, and having never supposed that everyone could possess the quick discrimination of her nearest friends, she accepted tranquilly a name she did not deserve, and waited on time and opportunity to reveal the truth. Though, as we have seen, all attempts to mark her with an official brand proved futile, the world of women continued to stand aloof long after the other sex had, for obvious reasons, become frankly enthusiastic. Not that it was safe, even for women, to get into touch with Ninon. Toleration would certainly, and friendship most probably follow ; and if there were any instance of dislike surviving knowledge it has escaped record. Ninon's women friends might, at times, be few but they were never chosen perforce from the socially obscure. Her exclusion was a matter of personal taste, more likely to have its rise in religious than in moral disagreement, never a demand of etiquette ; even with Versailles she was familiar unofficially to the very modest extent of her desires.

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Without counting acquaintances of her youth, such as the Princesse de Guémené, the Duchesse de Rohan, the Marquise de Piennes, and Maréchale de Bassompierre, Mme de La Suze was only one among several persons of fashion who were avowedly intimate with Ninon at the height of her public reputation for scandalous behaviour. A Coligny by birth, the sister of Ninon's early love, the Duc de Châtillon, she returned, after the death of her Scotch husband, to Paris, and resumed the place that became her rank and her reputation as a "precieuse", more natural, more daring, and with more genuine literary talent than most of her fellows. Pleasure-loving, heedless and, at this time, openly contemptuous both of the Huguenot and of the Catholic faith, she found nothing to object to in Ninon's views or conduct, while, for her part, Ninon could not but enjoy the society of a person so amiable, with such a pretty taste in verse, and so childlike a readiness to take all that the passing moment could give without a thought for the future.

Shrewder and more careful women than Mme de La Suze were also to be reckoned among Ninon's friends. Mme Cornuel could not match with a Coligny in birth, but her piercing wit won her a social position beyond what she could have claimed of right, without impairing a friendship with Ninon that lasted to the day of her death.

Mme Cornuel owed little to her personal appearance, and both she and Mme de La Suze were born in

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the second decade of the seventeenth century, but Ninon did not at all shrink from close association with beauties far younger than herself, even after she had long passed her prime. Like Mme de La Suze and several other of Ninon's friends, Mme de La Sablière belonged to a Huguenot family, and before she had reached the age of fifteen her father had chosen for her a husband of the same faith, in the person of her cousin, Antoine de Rambouillet, Sieur de La Sablière. Both families were wealthy—but neither noble, since the Rambouillets could boast no connexion, save in name, with the Marquis de Rambouillet. From bondage to a selfish, dissipated, and avaricious husband, Mme de La Sablière was delivered by a legal separation after some twelve years of marriage and the birth of three children, the youngest of whom was less than twenty years junior to its mother.

In everything but lineage Mme de La Sablière was well fitted to take a place in the highest ranks of Parisian society. Her education had been excellent, and her appetite for knowledge was insatiable. At a time when even scholarly men had often little Greek if much Latin, she read Homer and Virgil with equal fluency and appreciation. Of the metaphysics of Descartes she was an eager student and reckoned herself among his disciples, and her knowledge of mathematics and astronomy enabled her to point out blunders in an early poem of Boileau with an unanswerable force that the satirist never forgave,

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though he concealed his resentment until after her death.

Notwithstanding these and other accomplishments, no woman could have been less of a pedant than Mme de La Sablière. A happy gift of assimilation was only one, and not the chief, cause of this desirable freedom. A pedant learns for the sake of learning, or for the sake of being thought to know. Mme de La Sablière learnt in order to feel, and what she could not feel retained no interest for her. Her powerful mind was always at the service, not to say at the mercy, of a vivid imagination and a passionate heart. Facts bathed in the glamour of a noble scheme of thought and giving substance to the ordered marvel of the universe were a delight, but became hateful when they belonged to the mere commonplace of daily routine. For the course that she wished to take let it be what it would, Mme de La Sablière could always find reasons that seemed convincing, but it was never an ignoble course, however variable or however lacking in good-sense; and if the belief that was emotionally satisfying always appeared to her the truth, she was never consciously false in word or deed. Unconstrained by family ties, careless of money, and having sufficient not only for her own needs but for generous alms, Mme de La Sablière found in artistic and intellectual pleasures, combined with abundant friendships, a life that was her natural destiny, except that deep passion was lacking.

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A creature so brilliant, wayward, and charming appealed to Ninon both by likeness and by contrast ; a wide dissimilarity of character lending piquancy to their similarities of taste and mental endowment. Despite her many attractions and twenty years advantage in age, she was one of Ninon's companions at the concert which so enchanted Charles de Sévigné. Not long afterwards they took part in a scene that made literary history. Molière, who was then engaged in writing the *Malade imaginaire*, was anxious to make as effective and realistic as possible his satire upon the solemn futilities of admission to a medical degree. For this purpose he was invited, or invited himself, to supper with Mme de La Sablière, Boileau and Ninon being also of the party, and after supper, the four of them set to work to improvise macaronic Latin verses of the requisite absurdity. The atmosphere was favourable, the quartette admirably suited to their task, and amid a gay exchange of wit and laughter, Molière found himself provided with exactly the kind of ridicule that he was seeking. A day or two later the same party assembled in the Rue des Tournelles to hear the poet read his completed work, and pronounced it excellent.

That a woman endowed with Mme de La Sablière's charms should have many lovers was a matter of course, but how far they were successful is unknown, and it is certain that for several years her peace of mind depended on no one man. If she loved like Ninon

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she seemed no less able to forget the lover in the friend. This was but appearance. Mme de La Sablière craved devotion, craved to give recklessly, completely, finally, even more than to receive, and thereby to make her lover's heart utterly her own, and for ever. To her this alone was love, and she did not stay to count the cost.

Fate threw in her path the Marquis de La Fare, the head of a noble and ancient family of Languedoc, and at once the game of love turned into a matter of life or death. There was much to justify her passion. A few years younger than herself but a soldier from boyhood, La Fare had made a campaign against the Turks with extraordinary credit, then, returning to France, had distinguished himself at the battle of Seneff and elsewhere, only to find that Louvois, the all-powerful War Minister, refused him promotion on no other ground than that he was a rival for the good graces of the Marquise de Rochefort. Wit, charm, poetic talent, engaging manners, and an excellent temper were powerless against this opposition but might yet serve him in the world. La Fare resigned his commission, and not altogether unwillingly ; for he had now made Mme de La Sablière's acquaintance, and life meant love.

For four years the idyll lasted. Then came disillusion. La Fare began to grow weary and to find the novel excitement of basset more enthralling than Mme de La Sablière's known devotion. From basset

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he quickly passed on to Mlle Champmeslé, who was not of a temper or condition to fatigue him with romance. Desperate, but still hoping against hope, Mme de La Sablière carried her griefs almost daily to the Rue des Tournelles and thither with like regularity came the Marquis de La Fare to explain, or, perhaps, to excuse his conduct ; for he had long been and always remained a close friend of Ninon, though never anything more than a friend. She listened tirelessly, and pitied both from her heart, but she could do nothing to help. The tragedy took its course. Mme de La Sablière could no longer shut her eyes to the fact that the love of her life was gone beyond recall. She turned from the world and its ways in disgust, was received into the Catholic Church, devoted herself to the care of the sick in the Hospital of the Incurables, tried to assuage her longings in a passion of repentance, came to believe that all human affection was a sin, and growing more and more recluse, died of cancer, lonely and broken-hearted, when little over fifty years of age.

Mme de La Sablière withdrew from Ninon as she did from everyone save priests, nuns, and those who looked to her for aid, but in itself her piety need have formed no bar to continued friendship. The pious Duchesse de La Feuillade counted Ninon among her intimates. Calling one afternoon on the Duchess, M. de Meré found them so deep in talk, that though very little apt to believe that his society could be other

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than extremely welcome, he feared on this occasion to play the superfluous part. He was, however, soon put completely at his ease, and although he had long made himself a stranger to Ninon, she was so far from feeling the least resentment at his neglect that she welcomed him as an old friend, and warmly encouraged his desire to take up the thread of their intercourse as if it never had been broken.

On leaving the quiet chamber of the saintly Duchesse de La Feuillade, Ninon might receive from Marie-Anne Mancini, Duchesse de Bouillon, a letter written with the same sprightly malice by which she used as a child to evade the wrath of her stern and all-powerful uncle, and probably containing an invitation to join one of those unrestrained Temple banquets over which the Duchess was accustomed to preside ; for if the years had taken from her little or nothing of the proverbial Mazarin beauty they had also reduced rather than augmented her naturally small stock of discretion. With the Duchess, her two Vendôme nephews, and their associates Ninon could enjoy the utmost freedom of speech seasoned by wit and learning, but, nevertheless, she often refused their invitations, since excess in the matter of wine and brandy generally turned their laughter to mere riot.

In truth, Ninon had no need to seek any society that was not precisely to her taste. It would have been hard to find a person of talent or fashion who would not have felt proud to belong to the number who could

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claim for themselves the title of her intimates. They had good reason. At the Rue des Tournelles they could meet, as nowhere else in Paris, pleasure without noise, tact without insincerity, wit without discord, and, above all, a freedom of thought that was unassailable because faultlessly proportioned to the individual and to the occasion. The most orthodox and the most subserviently loyal would see no ground for offence, while the boldest, if their boldness were something more than the clatter of unwisdom, would feel no restraint.

Ninon's power did not wholly escape notice because it was intangible ; it could not have done so in seventeenth century France. Louis XIV himself who had to gaze through the clouds from the Olympus of Versailles in order to see what passed upon the earth, was wont, after he had given a command, to ask, and perhaps with more anxiety than he cared to show : " What does Ninon say about it ? " But Louis XIV would have been, in truth, superhuman if he could even vaguely have guessed that the quiet old lady in the little house in the Rue des Tournelles was his rival, almost the only rival left in France, and the wielder of a force that would prove greater than his own. To command and to be, or to seem to be obeyed, that was his prerogative. Ninon did not wish to infringe it. She gave no orders. She made no one her slave for a moment longer than he desired ; nay, in past times the complaint had run that she emancipated them too

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soon ; that they would willingly have served beyond the allotted term. What similarity could be imagined between her light bonds and the massive, irresistible power of Louis XIV ? Their chances of future influence appeared as little to admit of comparison as their present power, yet before Ninon had been thirty years in her grave the scene had strangely altered. To outward seeming the ideas and methods of Louis XIV still dominated France, but hardly the least observant can have failed to notice that they had become anachronisms, that the life blood of the country was making for itself new channels, leaving to the old system no more august function than somewhat to retard its flow. To Ninon, on the other hand, much of French society bore the relation that a free and slightly vulgarized copy has to a fine original picture ; the more delicate shades of her personality were missing, but the general resemblance was plain, and there is even good ground for thinking that it was not altogether undesigned. That is not to say that Ninon's influence, direct or indirect, was the cause of French eighteenth century manners. These were the product of various converging forces which cannot be measured independently, but the analogy remains, and is impressive.

In one case at least a cherished pupil of Saint-Cyr could reveal in later years, by deed if not by word, that she owed more to friendship with Ninon than to all the meticulous instructions of Mme de

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Maintenon and her priestly advisers. Marie-Claire Deschamps de Marsilly belonged by birth to one of the noblest families in France. Neither beauty nor physical vigour had fallen to her share, but wit and spirit amply supplied the deficiency. Mlle de Marsilly had been well-liked at Saint-Cyr, and from her first entrance on the world she continued to gain the affections of almost all those with whom she chanced to be brought in contact. Long after she had passed girlhood her appetite for pleasure was as keen as a child's and her friends enjoyed a trait that seldom fails to add charm to a strong, warm-hearted personality. Ninon felt the attraction, and despite a difference in age of more than half a century, was proud to reckon herself among Mlle de Marsilly's most devoted admirers.

The decorum of the Rue des Tournelles was not that of Saint-Cyr, but it cannot have taken Mlle de Marsilly many hours to learn that it was no less strict, and if she presently discovered that it was more genuine and more adaptable, the discovery can only have served to increase her pleasure in the unexpected fact that the famous Ninon de Lenclos was quite evidently desirous of winning the respect and liking of an inexperienced maiden of Saint-Cyr.

The ties and interests of marriage hardly even threatened harm to their budding friendship. Romance might have proved all-absorbing, but the partner chosen for Mlle de Marsilly was very much more

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nearly Ninon's contemporary than her own, and could hardly expect more than a placid affection from his young wife. In substance if not in form the choice was Mme de Maintenon's. The Marquis de Villette by selecting a bride from among the maidens of Saint-Cyr tacitly acknowledged that its patroness, the aunt who had almost forcibly converted him to Catholicism, still possessed a right to control his most important actions and must be known to approve his wooing. Whether reluctantly or otherwise, Mlle de Marsilly accepted her fate, and prepared herself for friendship with step-children who were her seniors, and one of whom had for a moment seemed likely to take the position now occupied by his father.

Ninon missed her young friend, and hastened to write, in genially ironic reference to the destructive effect of marriage upon feminine friendships, that she would never have dared to recall herself to Mme de Villette's memory had she not already learned from the Abbé de Chateauneuf that she was unforgotten. In truth, if Mme de Villette could be supposed to have needed a remembrancer, the Abbé, who held that no eulogy of Ninon was equal to her deserts, was the very man for the post, all the more as his connexion with M. de Villette gave him ample opportunities of expatiating to the young Marquise upon his favourite theme.

Ninon attributed to vanity her belief that she went further than others in everything that might touch

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the heart, but if she had lived long enough to observe the full development of Mme de Villette's character, she would have known that her warmth of affection had not been misplaced.

Love came late but with power. Many suitors of her own race tried to win the hand of the widowed Marquise de Villette, but she turned from them all to bestow herself upon an Englishman who offered without marriage a full measure of devotion. Her judgment had not failed. Lord Bolingbroke might be an exile from his native land, condemned to look back at a splendid past, and mourn the mistakes that appeared to have left him no future, but he remained the most brilliant Englishman of his day, and one whose warmth of heart preserved friendships when all else was in ruins. A nominal difference of faith could only help to make it plain that the real creed of both was one that Ninon might almost have been willing to accept, and the union of heart and mind which the death of the first Lady Bolingbroke allowed them, after a few years, to regularize, gave unbroken happiness to each for a term that left the powerful man only a short time to lament separation from a partner whose life had been a constant struggle against ill-health. Before that date the second Lady Bolingbroke had made for herself a name honoured alike by the wits of France and of England, had tamed the restless genius of her husband to something like content, and had lived a life full, varied,

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and free, despite a large share of anxieties, pains and disappointments.

The Marquise de Villette was not the only woman who was destined to carry a vivid memory of Ninon up to, or beyond, the middle of the eighteenth century. By patience and discretion Saint-Evremond gradually overcame the troubles that attended his exile. He resolved to make London his home since he was forbidden to live in Paris. Charles II put him financially at ease by the grant of a pension, which, though not large, was sufficient for his needs, and he found that not only the houses of his compatriots but also those of the most cultivated Englishmen of rank were open to him. Fortune presently brought new friends. The adventurous career of the Duchesse Mazarin led her to a court where many hoped that her striking beauty would meet with its due reward. Self-indulgent, thoughtless, and inconstant, she must, in her difficult position, have come to ruin without some sincere counsellor and friend. Attracted by a nature so opposite to his own, Saint-Evremond cheerfully took upon himself a burden that the Duchess was at no pains to make a light one, and when, at length, the unwearied intercession of his friends had smoothed the road for his return to Paris, he could not bring himself to accept an opportunity that involved the severing of ties which had grown very dear to him. Nevertheless he had by no means forgotten Ninon, and would have heartily rejoiced, had she, for her part, been able to



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spend the rest of her life with him in London. Since they could not meet, letters must serve their turn, supplemented, as far as might be, by the reports of friends. In Saint-Evremond's view an introduction to Ninon was a high compliment, one of the highest that he could pay. Of old he knew her taste, they had always understood each other, and he could feel sure both that his introductions would be welcome, and that those of his English friends whom he thought worthy of her acquaintance would, on their return to their own country, heartily aid him to spread her just fame.

Among Englishwomen, he gave the first place to Lady Sandwich, the brilliant daughter of Lord Rochester, who, in Saint-Evremond's judgment, surpassed her father in wit as he had surpassed all other Englishmen. A visit to Paris for her health under the charge of his friend Dr. Morelli provided Saint-Evremond with the opportunity of securing that Lady Sandwich should be able to compare the wit, generosity, and amiability in which he held her to excel with the like qualities that she must find in Ninon. The result was all that he could have hoped. The gulf of fifty years seemed nothing to such congenial spirits. The young woman and the old became companions, enjoying together the same things and people. When, at length, they separated, it was with mutual regret, tempered slightly by the thought that they still had the resource of letters ; for

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Lady Sandwich was not only, as was natural, perfectly acquainted with French, but had penetrated to the heart of Parisian society and could be trusted to understand those indefinable allusions which distinguish a letter from an essay.

Like many intellectual persons, Ninon often spoke evil of her memory, but she can never have had the least justification for supposing that its defect extended to matters of friendship. At frequent intervals letters from the Rue des Tournelles reached Hinchingsbrooke, there to be so piously cherished that nearly sixty years later Horace Walpole could, for a short time, indulge the hope that the recent death of "old Lady Sandwich" and the generosity of her heirs were about to put him in the position of making the Strawberry Hill Press world-famed by the issue of authentic letters from Ninon's pen; a proud prospect for so faithful a worshipper of "Notre-Dame des Amours".

Lord Rochester's witty daughter was, however, neither the first nor perhaps the last foreigner to owe acquaintance with Ninon to the good graces of Saint-Evremond. Some years earlier, M. Alphonse Turretini, a native of Geneva, had thought a visit to London appropriate to his views in life. The late Revocation of the Edict of Nantes had driven thither several of the most ardent and distinguished Huguenot clerics, and as a pastor, devoted to his Church, conscious of abilities, and modest enough to know that youth was the time for learning, M. Turretini could not but

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expect to profit largely from intercourse with the leading personages of his own communion.

By the Huguenots Saint-Evremond was regarded with favour. He disliked all persecution, and was more than ready to give active proof of sympathy for Frenchmen who had been condemned to exile by bigots, ignorant alike of justice and of the real interests of France. He was, too, always willing to discuss the points of difference between their respective faiths with the eagerness of an exile from the talk of Paris and the cheerful detachment of a Catholic who never allowed his creed to interfere with friendship, honour, pleasure, or good-sense. On such matters M. Turretini was an expert, able to maintain a position without rancour, and naturally inclined to feel a certain deference for Saint-Evremond's age and worldly-wisdom. They quickly became friends, and since M. Turretini wished to return home by way of Paris, Saint-Evremond offered to give him a letter of recommendation to Mlle de Lenclos. Of her, the young pastor had had occasion to hear much praise, not only from Saint-Evremond, but also from the chief of his own communion, M. de Ruvigny, afterwards Earl of Galway, and he joyfully accepted the chance of becoming personally acquainted with so famous a woman.

Ninon received him in the manner due to a friend of Saint-Evremond, and putting on her glasses, began to read, not perhaps without a slight smile, the letter

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he had brought ; for Saint-Evremond, writing warmly of M. Turretini's abilities and character, added the suggestion that he would in all probability evince his good taste by falling in love as speedily and effectively as other young men had done before him. Whether M. Turretini, in fact, felt any emotions of a kind upon which Geneva would have frowned, we, naturally, cannot tell ; but Ninon looked for no such result. She was content that M. Turretini should find her useful and friendly, while remarking with a touch of melancholy that if he could be supposed apt to fall in love with a merit that it was the fashion to call "distinguished", then Saint-Evremond's wishes might perhaps be fulfilled ; for by this fine word her friends were accustomed to try and console her for her losses.

Saint-Evremond, at any rate, continued for a number of years to believe that a handsome young man must be to Ninon's mind. Among such he reckoned the Duke of Saint-Albans who was sent on a diplomatic mission to Paris, at the same time as Lady Sandwich travelled thither for her health. Saint-Evremond might still indulge in a flattery, half-humorous, half-sincere, but Ninon was only too well aware that the age of love was dead beyond all resurrection, and vowed that she would not have cared to receive the Duke had he not been accompanied by so serious-sounding a person as Dr Morelli. From another point of view it was appropriate enough that

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Ninon should meet the son of Nell Gwyn, almost the only Englishwoman who has been both equally unabashed and, posthumously, as well-liked by her compatriots ; for in her lifetime she could make no pretence to rival Ninon's social prestige. It would be interesting to know whether the Duke compared Ninon's wit and charm with what he could recollect of his much more youthful mother ; but on this point history is silent.

To Ninon the anxieties of her youth had become a distant memory. Light of foot and clear of eye, she had walked along her chosen path without faltering, and it had led, not to the morass of the second-rate, but to honour. She had never stooped, and now, behold, the world did homage. It was a triumph, wonderful, unparalleled, bought at no price that she had any reason to grudge. She had served Nature, not slavishly, but as a free-woman, and Nature seemed to have given all she asked in fullest measure. But, in truth, as Ninon well knew, Nature gives nothing ; she only lends, always for a brief space, and on a tenure wholly uncertain. One by one her loans would be reclaimed. Some Ninon had already been forced to surrender, the rest would soon follow ; for the gods themselves serve a master, and that master is Time.

XIV

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A DRAMA has been ill-contrived if its climax comes before the last act, and to the spectator the interest of a human life is always in a large measure dramatic. So little was Ninon prone to think of appearances, that she perhaps never noticed this quality of her own career, but it cannot have escaped general observation. Hitherto, the chief scenes had belonged to the type of pure comedy: a charming heroine, the born favourite of fortune, had skilfully surmounted one danger after another, and gone from triumph to triumph, each less amazing than the next, while even those cast as foils to her brilliance had suffered no shame that could move the most tender-hearted to pity. But now some change of tone was inevitable; for a human life that is not cut short by accident does not close in obvious triumph. The world watched eagerly to see whether the end would be tragic failure or undignified pathos, or, as Ninon's friends might hope, in the spirit of that grave, open-eyed comedy which has most of the merits of tragedy with little of its suffering.

From one point of view the world waited in vain. Socially, the Rue des Tournelles continued to be what

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it had always been, and in the hostess the present blended so harmoniously with the past that they appeared the same. Yet, in truth, Ninon did not stand still. The age of Louis XIV admired a static reason and a final order, being desirous to suppose that human existence resembled a mathematical theorem ; but, since it was also restlessly alive, it moved swiftly. Ninon grew old amid these changes, but never to the last moment of her long life did she become old-fashioned. The manners and habits, the modes of thought and expression that had been praised in her youth fell into contempt, were held gross, pedantic, or absurd, but she remained, despite the gradual loss of her physical beauty, the embodiment of charm, the acknowledged standard of grace and delicacy, the living pattern of the mind and heart of France to every generation ; for Ninon, if not exactly “*das ewig weibliche*”, was that clearer thing, the eternal Frenchwoman—and all without ceasing to be simply herself. A few among her chosen intimates made some guess at the secret of this strange power, but the world at large was puzzled, and, according to its custom, took refuge in miracle and myth.

The story ran that on her eighteenth birthday Ninon found herself unexpectedly alone, when a visitor was announced who claimed to have matters of the utmost importance to communicate to her. Ninon’s curiosity was roused, and though the visitor gave no name, she

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did not on that account refuse him admission. A single glance was enough to tell her that she was in the presence of a complete stranger ; for by none who had ever set eyes upon him could he have been forgotten. He was a little, white-haired man—apparently old, yet in such a way as continually to give rise to doubts of his real age—with a gaze, keen, penetrating, and brighter than that of any youth. His dress was of no outlandish fashion, and remarkable only in being entirely black and set off by neither scabbard nor sword. Instead of the last named badge of rank he carried a small cane of the same colour as his dress. “ My visit surprises, perhaps, terrifies you,” he began gravely. “ Be not afraid. I am a man to whom all the mysterious powers of the earth are obedient, and who can at his pleasure determine the fate of any human being. I wish to know how you would like me to dispose of yours. Already, life has brought you much more joy than pain, and its best gifts are still to come. Every door in the world will be open to you, and it will be at your own choice to become the most famous and the happiest woman of your time. I offer you one of three things ; either the highest rank, or immeasurable riches, or eternal beauty. Choose which of the three you most desire, and be assured that there is no mortal who could offer you so much as I have done ; but choose without delay ; in seven seconds the opportunity will have passed for ever.”

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“ Ah ! Sir,” replied Ninon, “ the gifts that you are ready to bestow are of very unequal weight, and, since you leave the choice to me, I choose eternal beauty ; but what must I do to obtain so precious a boon ? ”

“ You must write your name upon my tablets,” the old man replied, “ and swear never to reveal the secret of this interview. I ask nothing more.”

Ninon took the required oath, and wrote her name on the little tablet that the stranger held out to her. While she was doing so, he lightly touched her left shoulder with his ring. “ True magic,” he added, “ needs no pompous display. I have kept my promise. Your beauty will now be eternal, your charm irresistible, men and women alike will be your slaves at a wish. It is the greatest power that any human being can possess. During the six thousand years that I have wandered about the earth from one end to the other, I have found only four mortals who were worthy of it : Semiramis, Helen, Cleopatra, and Diane de Poitiers. You are the fifth, and the last, to receive this gift. You will always seem young, be charming and be adored. No man will be able to help falling in love with you, and you will be loved by everyone whom you yourself love. You will also enjoy perfect health, and though you will reach an advanced age you will never grow old. You will excite the most ardent passions, when other women have nothing but the horrors of decay for their share, and you will be remembered as

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long as the world endures. All this must seem to you magical ; but ask me no questions. You will see me only once again in your life, and that will happen in less than eighty years. But then you may tremble, for then you will have only three days to live. Do not forget that my name is Noctambule."

No sooner had Ninon's benefactor uttered this last word than he mysteriously vanished.

It was not long before legend came to the aid of miracle. Ninon had been dowered with eternal youth and charm, therefore it must be true that in her extreme old age she inspired passions more intense than other beauties could hope for in their youth.

The tale was told that the Abbé Gédoyne, a young man who had recently attained the natural conclusion of a distinguished university career, was introduced to the fascinations of the Rue des Tournelles, fell speedily and violently in love with his hostess, and, presently, avowed his passion in the warmest terms. Ninon did not hesitate to acknowledge that the Abbé had touched her heart, but, contrary to her usual custom, she asked him to wait a few days. He consented most reluctantly, and his joy was proportionate when he was told that he need wait no longer. Tenderly, he asked Ninon why she had been so cruel to him. It was not like her to shrink from the joys of love. Ninon admitted her fault, and begged the Abbé to forgive her. A little spice of vanity was, she confessed, the motive of her really unjustifiable conduct.

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He would, she felt sure, pardon the trial of his patience when he learned that the first transports of his love were to possess a feature that was certainly rare, and probably unique. "I mean," she whispered, "that I wanted to wait until my birthday. I was eighty years old this morning."

There is not the slightest reason to suppose that the inventor of this tale was endowed with a sense of humour or had any view to sarcasm. On the contrary, he solemnly asserts that he obtained his information direct from the Abbé Gédoyne, and he rather spoils the climax of his story by making the Abbé continue in this state of passion for a year, and, after an absence of another year or two in foreign parts, return to Paris still full of eagerness to renew tender relations with his charmer. Ninon, however, is allowed, somewhat late in the day, to exhibit a spark of good sense by refusing to listen to his passionate entreaties.

The truth, of course, was quite different. Ninon's real and marvellous power owed little, if anything, to freedom from the disabilities of age, and, in fact, survived her physical health. It was, what alone it could be, a triumph of personality. To overlook Ninon must at all times have been difficult; for she was so clearly individual, and the society in which she lived was neither huge nor shapeless. Indifferent to notoriety and hostile to noise though she was, she could not fail to be visible in a world which has never superfluously abounded in people who act or think for themselves.

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Yet hers was very far from being a triumph of mere uniqueness. The bastard romantic whose highest ideal is originality and who ends by being in very truth "a fool of his own making", was the product of a later day. Ninon would sooner have congratulated the woman with the longest nose in the world on the extent of her nasal individuality—for here, as Ninon's portraits tell us, there would have been room for a trace of fellow-feeling—than have valued herself for uniqueness. Neither Ninon nor her contemporaries were in the least prone to indulge the commercial habit of mind that sees a value in mere rarity, or to forget the obvious truth that the value of an individual depends on the qualities of that individual and not at all on the bare fact of individuality. The atmosphere of competitive striving that tends to make peculiarity an object of ambition can seldom have invaded the Rue des Tournelles, and, if the legend of the Abbé Gédoyen needed any refutation, it would be condemned by the incongruity of setting Ninon to break a "record".

The effect that Ninon produced was always felt to be due rather to a combination of different qualities than to one supreme excellence. She was beautiful, but when beauty had faded she was still Ninon. Her wit was unsurpassed, but not all her friends were ready to live on wit, and she had no desire to appear either witty or clever. While many were blown about with every gust of fashion, seeking chiefly to tread in the footsteps of power, and being themselves nothing were

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nothing regarded, she possessed a serene strength that proved inexhaustibly attractive. She was natural with the nature that continually changes yet is always the same, exhibiting a gracious harmony with her past self that suggested the peaceful immortal ripple of a stream rather than the unyielding hardness of a rock.

Ninon changed without seeming to change, because she changed naturally. To be natural—and natural was the word that her friends most readily applied to Ninon—has no definite meaning save in contrast with some other possibility. They meant that she was sincere, reliable, apposite without seeking effect. Ninon changed, but only in response to her own ideal and not to the opinion of the world, and, therefore, slowly. She was not feminine enough to have that unshakeable, unevidenced belief in her own perfection which a recent woman writer of note has held to be the essence of femininity. Her light, cheerful criticisms were often keen and would have given offence had it not been generally known that her most unsparing criticism was reserved for herself. Not being inclined to worship herself she worshipped no other object, real or imaginary. Her friends were human beings, whose merits she amply recognized and to whose faults she was not blind. Her belief in life was restrained, and if the notion of adoring life, or the life-force had been heard of in her day, she could justly have answered that she knew too much for phallic worship under any disguise.

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She was constitutionally intellectual, but too much a woman to mistake theory for fact, and, therefore, willing to be rational without the least danger of becoming rationalistic. The facts of which she needed to take account were her own nature and the character of the world in which she had to live. She knew the possibilities and the limitations of both, and sought to make what she could out of the somewhat meagre chances of life. The result is in the main already familiar. For herself she would not be bound by habit or custom. Each situation was to be judged solely on its merits, without regard either to the opinion of the world or her own past feelings. But this was very far from being enough. Intensely social, Ninon cared little for an isolated wisdom. She knew that she must find, and in fact found, the way to please without sacrificing her own ideals or ambitions. But she could also look beyond herself. What to her might be wisdom to others might be foolishness. Everyone must make what they could of their own lives according to their own natures, a nature that might be utterly different from hers. Those who succeeded in achieving happiness by whatever means, she counted wise, though the road they travelled were in the opposite direction to the one that she had chosen. Expecting little from fate and rather less from her neighbours, she could not be other than tolerant. Some of her friends recognized and enjoyed her unalterable serenity of spirit. Many, perhaps, enjoyed without

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understanding. For them it was enough that Ninon was no less reliable than the family solicitor and infinitely more amusing.

In society Ninon never failed, but society was far from being the whole of her life, and to one or two of her most intimate friends, in particular to Saint-Evremond, she made no secret of her consciousness that social triumphs were a poor substitute for youth, health, and pleasure. Friendship she still had, but the friendships of the old are held on a precarious tenure. M. d'Elbène, the Cunctator as Saint-Evremond unforgetfully named him, spent his last days in the Hospital for Incurables. A few years later death removed Charleval, now the oldest as he had long been the most utterly devoted of Ninon's Parisian intimates.

Saint-Evremond still lived, but when even the Peace of Ryswick failed to move him to the difficult adventure of a Parisian journey Ninon realized that the years had taken from him the strength for all such enterprises, and that she would never see him again. It was a grief to both ; for they would, as they repeatedly acknowledged, have wished to pass the rest of their lives together, but particularly to Ninon, who, in one of her rare expressions of feeling, admitted that she loved " her very dear friend more than philosophy could justify ".

Time and chance had brought many other losses of a similar, though less intimate kind, such as the death of Mme de La Sablière and the dispersion of

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the Huguenots by the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes. A touch of sadness was in place ; and Ninon was naturally pensive and, above all, of a temperament that forbade oblivion. After fifty years she quoted a saying of Des Yveteaux as familiarly as though he had been dead for scarce as many weeks.

In Ninon, violent and fleeting passions were compensated by a tenacity of friendship that neither death nor distance could relax, for there was in it no trace of the jealousy of possession. Saint-Evremond might prefer to remain with the Duchesse Mazarin rather than to live again in Paris, but Ninon was not only quite unchanged towards him, but could write of the Duchess, whom she had never chanced to meet, with perfect friendliness, and on occasion gratefully. With such a nature it is a tribute to Ninon's love of truth that even to comfort Saint-Evremond after the death of the Duchess she would say no more than : " If one could believe, as Mme de Chevreuse did when dying, that in the next world one was going to talk with one's friends, it would be a pleasant thought " ; an expression of hope so characteristically measured that Saint-Evremond must have smiled over it despite his grief.

Ninon sought consolation among the young, and, as we have seen, by no means without success, but she declared that they could not at all compare with the men and women of her own time. Millions of elderly people have said the like in every age of the

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world's history, but Ninon's luck held, and her commonplace had the merit of exceptional truth. Quite recent investigations have established that almost throughout Europe there was a striking decline in ability towards the end of the seventeenth century and that it was nowhere more marked than in France where the tide of genius had reached its greatest height.

Beauty was gone, and health threatened to follow it. A long and very serious illness was not the worst. Ninon had to recognize with Saint-Evremond that the supreme penalty of old age was the loss of hope. She had been ill before, but, now she knew that she would never again be well. To so active a spirit, a strict and monotonous rule of life was a severe hardship. "I am," she confessed, "sometimes weary of always doing the same thing, and commend the Swiss Guard who threw himself into the Seine on that account." Her admiration, however, stopped short of the sincerest form of flattery, and her feelings only found vent in expressions of regret tinged with disdain for their own futility. The past was gone beyond recall, and sympathetic friends made full use of the opportunities she gave them to point out that she had much less to complain of than other people at a like age, a truth equally undeniable and irrelevant and, therefore, to be brushed aside. "However that may be," Ninon wrote, "if, when I was young, anyone had proposed to me such a life as this I should have

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hanged myself," and she goes on, "at any rate I can still enjoy my meals. How I should like to have the chance of matching my digestion against yours and chatting with you about all the amusing people we have known, the mere remembrance of them gives me more pleasure than the company of many people I see ; though there is good in them too, but, really, nothing by comparison."

It was easy for Saint-Evremond to picture the half-ironic smile, the token of a shrewd suspicion that the wine of life was a little corked, with which Ninon sat down to write such candid self-revelations, and he knew that he was not failing in sympathy when he answered that he was charmed with the phrase about hanging herself. Nor was he at all less delighted at her appreciation of the pleasures of the table. His own taste for good wine and good eating had not been impaired by age. He sent Ninon China tea. He asked anxiously whether she could induce M. de Gourville to choose him some wine, in ignorance of the fact that the ex-ambassador was now confined to his own house, and so entirely crippled by gout that his friends seldom liked to trouble him with any sort of business. In spite of these discouraging circumstances, Ninon added that if she could insinuate the idea by some means that she did not yet foresee, she would certainly do so. We are, doubtless, justified in concluding that M. de Gourville presently discovered that the choice and dispatch of a few cases of wine

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for Saint-Evremond would prove an agreeable relief from the tedium of ill-health.

Food as well as wine was a joy to Saint-Evremond, and in response to Ninon's praises of digestion, he wrote gaily : " At eighty-eight "—a slight exaggeration of his antiquity—" I eat oysters every morning. I dine well and I don't sup badly ; men have been reckoned heroes for a lesser merit than mine " ; and, on another occasion, he proudly informed Ninon that his appetite and digestion had been victorious over Lady Sandwich's at a great banquet given by Lord Jersey.

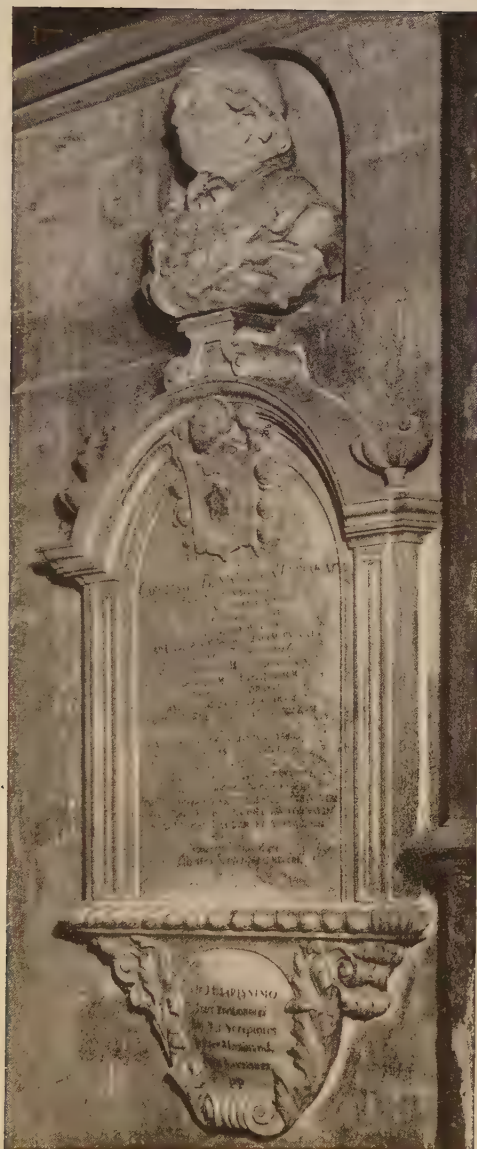
With clear eyes the two old friends faced the lengthening shadows, and encouraged each other to win such victories as might still be possible. Saint-Evremond did not spare praise ; in this, too, competing successfully with Lady Sandwich. " Ninon," he wrote, " was honoured by young and old, in London as much as in Paris, and her fame would be eternal ; though this last was a slight matter, since a week of happy life was of greater value than seven centuries of posthumous renown " ; pleasant words that Ninon discounted by reminding herself that Saint-Evremond had a lively imagination and that Lucian had written a eulogy on a fly.

To other minds Ninon's prestige suggested other thoughts. Under the combined influence of advancing years and Mme de Maintenon, Louis XIV had grown zealous for religion and made piety the fashion. When Ninon did not chance to set the fashion she

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had usually been content to follow it, but she showed no signs of an inclination to follow this one. The opportunity was plain, and more than one courtly cleric perceived it, among them the Abbé Testu. That previous attempts were said to have failed was no discouragement to him ; for was he not a favourite of long standing with all women of taste, and fully conscious of possessing an eloquence and address that had not yet earned their due reward ? No doubt he had, hitherto, appeared in the Rue des Tournelles rather in the light of an ornament of society than of religion, but, surely, it was not too late to make a change. Nor, in truth, did he find it so. Any fear that Ninon might display some surprise or, even, annoyance at his sudden eagerness for her submission to the Catholic Church was quickly proved baseless. She listened most courteously, answering his arguments without heat, and quickly apprehending the more delicate points which, at this stage, it was wise only to insinuate. The presence of other guests was no check on his eloquence—for that he felt himself too much experienced in the world—but, naturally he must be content to prepare the ground and await more definite results on another occasion.

At length, by no means ill-content with his evening's work he rose and bade his hostess good-night. When the door had closed behind him, Ninon turned to her friends and remarked gently : “ If M. Testu is counting on my soul to win him the prebend he is so



THE TOMB OF SAINT-EVREMOND IN
WESTMINSTER ABBEY



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anxious for, he runs a very serious risk of dying unbeneficed." Ninon's comments on things grave or gay were apt to form an item of fashionable news. The Abbé soon learnt of his danger and wisely thought that some softer soil than was to be found in the Rue des Tournelles might better reward his priestly labours.

The shadows grew darker. Saint-Evremond, urged at the last to reconcile himself with the Catholic Church and still giving preference to a reconciliation with his outworn stomach, had become a monument in Westminster Abbey. The age Ninon had loved was passing, almost past ; the new age was a child. By good hap Ninon knew that child and admired him. M. Arouet was her man of business ; Mme Arouet had been her friend, and also, an intimate of the Abbé de Chateauneuf. Their son, François-Marie Arouet, showed signs of repaying in some sort the careful education which he had lately begun to receive from the Jesuits of Clermont, lovers of good literature who were always ready to give unprejudiced encouragement to pupils desirous to learn how to use words, and possessed of some natural aptitude for doing so.

Of young François-Marie Arouet's capacity in this direction there can never have been much doubt, and his godfather, the Abbé de Chateauneuf, considered him worthy, boy though he was, of being introduced to Ninon. His lively wit and quickness of apprehension made in her eyes ample amends for a boldness of

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speech not always to be distinguished from impertinence, especially when a secret awe of reputation made him anxious to give proof of absolute self-possession.

From the height of her vast experience Ninon could pardon such trifles and detect in the brilliant child tokens of the genius that she too often found lacking in his older contemporaries ; but he, on his side, was not equally tolerant. To his youth the physical decrepitude of old age was repulsive, the glamour of a beauty that was dead meant nothing to him, and his preternaturally keen eyes detected in his hostess qualities of character that aroused his antagonism. The child could not have known, and it is improbable that the man ever guessed the cause of his dislike, but he had seen truly none the less.

Despite resemblances in effect, and even in point of view, that have made critics of great discernment count him as Ninon's spiritual heir, François-Marie Arouet belonged alike by nature and upbringing to a different species. In after years he characterized the difference, vaguely but not inappropriately, by saying that Ninon was austere. She was, though the child who noticed it must have been a very acute observer. To call her a saint might excite smiles, so little was she what is usually implied by the title ; but the description would not be meaningless. The François-Marie Arouet who at the first convenient opportunity discarded his hereditary style for the more aristocratic

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sounding M. de Voltaire was from childhood of the world. In the springs of character that determine values he had little, save pity, in common with Ninon. The necessity to please was not for him an addition, perhaps an irksome addition, to wisdom, it was the essence of the matter. The burgess-bred child could never have enough of property or rank. When he had become a European potentate dukes and marquises had still so much glamour that for his own part he was proud to boast a minor court title. To Ninon, who had known such people from infancy, and who had seen more of them than she could readily count divested of their trappings, these were among the names and baubles that were mere emptiness, on an inferior footing, if that were possible, to superfluous wealth. There was another distinction. To François-Marie Arouet, as to M. de Voltaire, his word was a fragile matter, not to be set against substantial advantages ; Ninon felt differently, and most probably he found the difference peculiarly austere.

Little as he ever showed any gratitude for it, Voltaire owed Ninon one thing of undeniable value. Shortly after the beginning of their acquaintance she felt that the time had come to make her will. It was an affair of some delicacy. Death-beds had always been the opportunity of the Catholic Church, and a will that ostentatiously ignored the sole official religion of France would to many of her friends seem in bad taste, and might, as Ninon well knew, have

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unpleasant consequences of the kind that to us are connected with the death of Adrienne Lecouvreur. She had no taste for the vanity of funeral pomp, she would guard against that by leaving only the smallest possible sum for the expenses of her burial, but her body had served her too well to be cast down a sewer. Even a man so little distinguished for piety as the late M. de Gourville had left not inconsiderable sums for masses and had used some warm expressions with regard to his sins, and in testimony of his belief in the Catholic faith. Ninon could not follow his example ; yet, she must say something. After the notary she summoned had written the usual heading, she began : “ *Puisque Dieu me fait la grâce d’avoir l’esprit libre* ” —a harmless phrase, to the effect that she was in due possession of her faculties ; but not a thing or at any rate not the sole thing that other people took occasion to give thanks for in their wills. “ I leave,” Ninon went on, “ to my confessor, M. Brunet, fifty francs to say fifty masses for the repose of my soul ” —a nice little man, a fireside confessor, at any rate ; Jeanneton would doubtless be presented with a new pair of silk stockings, or some such trifle, and if in the excitement of trying them on the masses should chance to be forgotten, that would probably make no difference to anything.

For the rest Ninon’s will was a simple affair. François-Marie Arouet received a thousand francs to buy books ; otherwise the only characteristic

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features were gifts to impecunious female relations and legacies of unusual generosity to her servants, together with the stipulation that none of the beneficiaries were to trouble to put on mourning. Though Ninon had only four servants they received between them nearly six thousand francs. The kitchen-maid fared, it is true, only a little better than Ninon's soul, but the cook was left a sum that most people of Ninon's property would have counted sufficient for their best servant, and over five thousand francs were divided between her maid and her man servant, who happened to be brother and sister, and who had, apparently, been in her service for about a dozen years.

That service was not destined to be much prolonged. Early in the following autumn Ninon took to her bed. With increasing weakness sleep failed, and one night she lay counting the slow passage of the hours and thinking over all that life had meant. Memories she had in abundance, but she did not disguise from herself that she had now nothing else. The present was pain and weariness, the future—she could have no future, even the brief expectations to which she had learned to accustom herself were no longer permissible. The instinct of life, the mere habit of living suggested continuance ; but it was an illusion, and Ninon had never loved illusions. Her thoughts formed themselves as distinctly as when she had been in full possession of youth and strength. She felt no change there, and reaching out for the tablet

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and pencil by her bedside, she slowly traced a few lines. They ran as follows :—

*Qu'un vain espoir ne vienne point s'offrir
Qui puisse ébranler mon courage.
Je suis en âge de mourir,
Que ferois-je ici davantage ?*

Ninon had finished with life, and presently she sank into a doze.

Two days later a brief entry in the registers of the parish of Saint Paul recorded the burial of Anne de Lenclos, fille majeure, aged (it was supposed) about ninety years.

EPILOGUE

DESPITE the extreme haste and simplicity of her funeral, Ninon's death was to Parisian society an event. The chorus of praise began at once and swelled to an astounding volume. No one dared, perhaps no one wished to strike a discordant note ; the Catholic Church has often found it the simplest and wisest course to allow room for the impression that the most notoriously uncatholic lives closed in an odour of sanctity. If the notice of Ninon's death in the official *Journal* of the Marquis de Dangeau was marked by his usual brevity and commonplace, it contained not the faintest hint of anything uncomplimentary to the deceased. Less official persons could afford to be greatly more expansive. It would be impossible to outdo the Abbé Fraguier in the enthusiasm with which he celebrated Ninon's charms and virtues. "I knew Mlle de Lenclos," he says, "during the last thirteen or fourteen years of her life. She has now paid her debt to nature, and I acknowledge that nothing can lessen the regret which I feel at her loss. Her incomparable charm of mind and manner was united to such perfect integrity as to make her a miracle. If her career had been spent in the occupation of the highest offices of the State she could not have

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enjoyed an old age more honourable and more respected than that which followed a life full of gallantry and love. Old people loved her for the memory of the pre-eminence that had belonged to her in the world of their youth, and less for the memory of her attractions than of her virtues. The young loved her for the sake of the grace and beauty which were still visible at her advanced age, and which were, in truth, unsurpassable"; and M. Fraguier concludes: "all that she thought was well thought, all that she said was well said, all that she did was well done. Her house was the resort of men of honour, and she, in that respect superior to the greatest geniuses, was always the most honoured."

Obituary eloquence is not unreasonably suspect, but the proud and strictly orthodox Saint-Simon confided to his *Memoirs*, that were not to see the light for more than a century after Ninon's death, a portrait not different from that of the Abbé Fraguier in substance of compliment, though, naturally, expressed in much more restrained language.

Nor was Ninon speedily forgotten. From the pious Queen Marie Leczinska to such people as the biographers Bret and Douxmesnil there was a cult of Ninon, and even in the fourth quarter of the eighteenth century Saint Foix could write: "We have as few Ninons as Corneilles; it was reserved for the century of Louis XIV to produce the great and the marvellous in every kind."



*Philippe de Courcillon, Marquis de Dangeau
Grand Maître de l'Ordre de St. Etienne du Mont Carmel et de*

PHILIPPE DE COURCILLON, MARQUIS DE DANGEAU

EPILOGUE

The first obvious discord was sounded by a foreigner. Rousseau declared that he was so far from sharing the general admiration for Ninon that he would not have wished to make of her either a friend or a mistress ; the sentimental, equalitarian burghess of Geneva peeping through the mists of tradition at the ironic soul of the Parisian great lady saw nothing that he could understand and felt only a resentful antagonism.

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